

So, what star sign are you?

The Buddha was a Taurus. The bull, strong and stately. His horoscope today says this: 'Your inspirational cow-person for the month is William Shakespeare. "Go to your bosom. Knock there and ask your heart what it doth know."' I'm not kidding; that's really what it says.

Jesus? There was a song about that. I forget the exact words, but it went something like this. 'Jesus was a Capricorn, he ate organic food \ His hair was long, so was his beard, he never wore no shoes \ He used to hang around with such a funky bunch of friends \ I bet you that if he came back they'd just nail him up again!' Sad but true.

'Kabosh', I hear some protest. 'Primitive irrational unscientific nonsense. How can the position of the stars on one's birthday influence one's character or life story? Anyway, the stars have shifted since the constellations were first described, so the whole thing's out of synch.' We should be careful here. Yes, astrology and similar systems are irrational, or more accurately, pre-rational. They appeal to strata of the mind that pre-date the development of reason and its children, science and philosophy. But that doesn't in and of itself prove that they are incorrect. Those of a rationalistic bent often dismiss such things with nary a scrap of actual evidence, a sure sign that their 'scientism' is becoming another repressive dogma.

Is there, in fact, a correlation between star signs and personality? The answer is not obvious, but it should be amenable to empirical testing. Years ago I read of a study, apparently quite comprehensive in scope and rigorous in method, which found no correlation between star signs and personality, but a significant correlation between rising signs and personality. So there you go. Both sides are right and wrong.

What did the Buddha think of astrology? Not a lot. He took the whole realm of astrology, magic, amulets, channelling, fortune telling, geomancy, rituals, dreamwork, auspicious signs, and so on, and tossed them in a bag labelled 'trivial sciences'. He forbade monastics from dealing in such matters, claiming that they were irrelevant to genuine spiritual development. Note that he never said they were impossible, he said they were useless. As to why they are useless, the short answer is because they're sometimes right and sometimes wrong. The long answer is more interesting and will take us some way into Buddhist philosophy.

When we speak of star signs, we refer to some symbol or mark which stands as a shorthand summary of a whole range of qualities. We point to a common feature, time of birth, which connects otherwise unrelated people, enabling us to ascribe shared personality traits to them.

Magic works the same way. The classic example is the voodoo doll. We make a toy image that has some recognizable features in common with a certain person, and then whatever we do to the doll – usually unpleasant – will also happen to that person.

Or else rituals. We perform the same actions in just the same way as has been done countless times in the past. This connects us with the stream of history, identifies us with previous performers of the ritual, and allows us to tap the power of all those performances. In this way, such symbolic gestures build a sense of community, of group identity.

This is just like football fans. We identify with a team wearing certain arbitrary colours; when our team wins, we exult; when they lose, we are mortified. Obviously irrational. Yet the persistence of such irrational behaviour is an indication that something is going on which appeals to a very active and important part of our minds.

In Buddhism this function of the mind is called perception – the way we interpret or recognize things. Perception sorts out the jumble of raw data presented through the senses into meaningful unities. When we see a picture of a tree in a field, perception recognizes that the tree is one thing, the field is another. Perception sees three eggs, three potatoes, and three oranges and recognizes the ‘threeness’ of them.

This ability to reduce the complex to the simple is perception’s invaluable virtue, and at the same time its fatal flaw. This kind of knowledge is invariably limited, approximate, fuzzy. We can only ever speak in terms of tendencies, probabilities, and generalities. We can correlate, but there remains an element of doubt. Do not underestimate this fuzziness. As long as it remains, the mind will keep playing there, reading faces in the clouds or stories in the flames. It will never see things clearly enough to eradicate doubt and let go.

There is a great difference between correlation and causality. With causality our knowledge becomes absolute, unshakeable. Knowing that *this* is the cause of *that*, we also know without a doubt that if *this* is absent, so too is *that*. We know that craving and ignorance are the cause of suffering; by replacing craving with contentment and ignorance with awareness we will never generate any more suffering. So for the stream-enterer, doubt vanishes when they see conditionality, dependent origination. At the same time, too, they let go of what is popularly known as ‘attachment to rites and rituals’, more accurately ‘misapprehension of virtue and vows’. They understand the eightfold path, so they can no longer see any spiritual worth in star signs, magic, witchcraft, and so on.

But the reader may have noticed that I have struck a note of caution against being too dismissive of perception and the correlative systems it engenders. Why? Because it’s there. It is a real and important part of our psyches. It should not be repressed. Repression – pretending something doesn’t exist because we don’t like it – plays no part in Buddhism. Rather, perception should be understood and developed appropriately as part of our regular practice.

I like to illustrate the role of symbols in Buddhism by employing the familiar framework of the five aggregates in an unfamiliar way. Start with the body, the aggregate of physical

form. Life, for most of us most of the time, revolves around feeding it, caring for it, deodorizing it, lugging it from place to place.

Some of the things which happen to the body we like – the aggregate of feeling. But invariably we run into painful feelings too – plain old sickness and discomfort, and a more subtle, pervasive worry about the meaning of life. We wonder, is this all there is?

Then we see a sign: perhaps a Buddhist mendicant wearing their robes, carrying an alms-bowl. This, our perception, gives rise to faith: surely here is one who knows the answer. And so we become a Buddhist, repeating the traditional formula of going for refuge. We bow before the Buddha image, and we feel a warm sense of community, of belonging, as we chant the ancient words of homage with the other devotees.

But we still have only a vague notion of the meaning of the Buddha's message. If we wish to develop a more sophisticated, more powerful, and more insightful relationship with the Dhamma than just devotion, we must make efforts to study and investigate the Buddha's teachings. Here the aggregate of conceptual activities comes to the fore. We pick up a Dhamma book and read of the four noble truths, the eightfold noble path, the dependent origination. We learn to analyse, to distinguish good from bad, Dhamma from not-Dhamma, and to weave these lessons seamlessly into the fabric of our lives. Our doubts and worries abate as we begin to make more sense of our lives, of our minds.

But these books keep reminding us that book-learning is not enough. We are still yet to experience the deep peace we yearn for. So we find a quiet place, sit down, close our eyes, and focus awareness on the gentle flow of the breath. We learn to develop peaceful states of refined awareness, and start to see that which the Buddha called the mind – the aggregate of consciousness.

We've come a long way. But there's a subtle Mara who often lurks at this stage in our practice, an evil demon in the guise of beautiful, meaningful visions and signs in our meditation. Some of them may be true – these are especially dangerous – and some may be false. But almost invariably, when meditators encounter these they straight away forget all the teachings they've learnt, and attach. Conceit arises – the yogi thinks they're someone special. It never occurs to them to doubt the apparition. Surely, with the mind so pure, nothing bad could appear? Don't you believe it.

There are many meditators who, just as they are making significant progress, fall back into mystification. They'll say they had a Bodhisattva vow together with so-and-so in their past lives; or that they'll become an arahant in this life; or that their kamma makes them do such-and-such. This is just delusion, a childish retrogression to more primitive modes of thought.

The advice of a responsible meditation teacher at this point is: forget it. Stay cool. Leave those visions alone, do not grant them any significance. Treat them like poppies growing by the wayside – admire their beauty as you walk by, but if you stop to sniff them you'll become so intoxicated you'll forget the purpose of the journey. Remember that those who have gone before also saw such visions, and they found out that that is not the way.

Among the most worrying of such apparitions is the appearance of beings from other realms. Usually this is simply imagination. When the mind is peaceful, imaginings can seem incredibly real. But in truth, the attachment to such voices and visions marks a tendency to delusion or even incipient schizophrenia. Not, I hasten to add, that meditation makes you mad. We're all mad already, more or less. Pursued in a balanced, gradual way, meditation is the only way to become sane. But for some, misapprehension of their meditation experiences – not the experiences themselves, note, but the attachment to them – can trigger a decline in mental stability. Their visions seem more real, more meaningful than the outside world.

The simplest response is to ignore these visions and get on with your meditation. What do you hope to get from invisible beings anyway – do you think they know something the Buddha didn't? If you would not invite a stranger into your house, why would you invite a stranger into your mind?

If you do want to test whether the being is real or not, you'll have to ask it for some information that you don't know and which can be verified. For example, you might ask it for some details of its past life as a human, and then go through the records and archives to ascertain the truth of the matter. But be warned – beings from other realms are not always pure and good. Sometimes they might tell the truth, sometimes they might not. In fact, such beings are often hungry ghosts – hungry for homage, for adulation. They get a kick from being worshipped and treated like a god.

Perhaps the most insidious consequence of the belief that one is in contact with invisible entities is the gradual erosion of spiritual self-determination. Willingly, we hand the responsibility for our spiritual development over, allowing some unknown being to instruct us, guide our practice, and ultimately to run our life. We forget the Buddha's injunction that one should be one's own guide, one's own refuge.

Following the Buddha's instructions is the cause; enlightenment is the effect. Perception has its place, but it is less reliable even than reason, what to speak of true insight? One truly following the Buddha's path will not take seriously these omens, visions, or meaningful coincidences. Mere appearances, mere seemings. Would your hunger be sated by a photo of a mango? Get the real thing, peel off the skin of appearances, and taste the flesh of reality.