

BOOK REVIEW

Supernormal: Science, Yoga, and the Evidence for Extraordinary Psychic Abilities by Dean Radin. New York: Deepak Chopra Books, 2013. 400 pp. ISBN 978-0307986900.

“It’s only a matter of will . . . you just have to train, gentlemen.” Thus the commentary of a fakir to the inquiring looks of baffled and curious medical doctors who visited him backstage after his spectacular performances. Such performances included an act where he hung himself with his unprotected chin on a swinging trapeze using a razor-sharp sword as a bar. Other acts consisted of various perforations of his body. His helpers, for example, beat two meat hooks through his shoulders and heaved him up with the help of a block and tackle. The fakir said that he is able to make his body partly or absolutely pain-free and numb by extreme concentration and autosuggestion. The newly afflicted wounds, added daily, did not bleed. He said: “If they bleed it is a warning signal. Then the suggestion isn’t strong enough.” All the wounds were healed the following morning and one could only see tiny little white points.

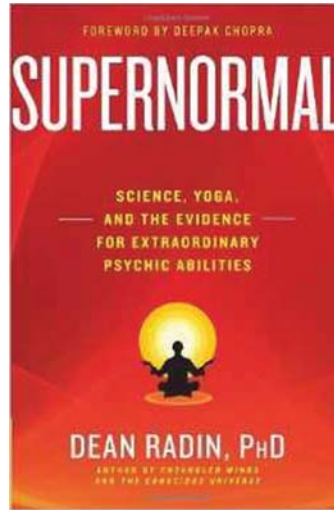
It seems obvious what this ‘story’ has to do with the topic of the book under review. We learn from a person with extraordinary abilities performing actions that are commonly known in connection with East Asian religious rituals, Indian *sādhus*, and yogic techniques. The latter build the content framework of *Supernormal: Science, Yoga, and the Evidence for Extraordinary Psychic Abilities* by Dean Radin. But why this little ‘story’ as kind of an introduction? It should serve to point toward some particular issues concerning the book and its topic. However, it is not a ‘story’ taken from Radin’s work but found in an issue of the German weekly newsmagazine *Der Spiegel* from 1949,¹ and it does not deal with an Indian *sādhu* but with German house-painter Anton Petersen who performed during the 1940s and 1950s under the stage name Carry Sunland. Although he developed interests in psychology, occultism, yoga, and spiritism in Berlin in the 1920s, he was certainly not in line with Indian *sādhus* and the yogic traditions, neither culturally nor with regard to his worldview or spiritually. The crucial point is: Could the extraordinary abilities of a German stage performer justifiably be compared with the *siddhis*, the spiritual, supernatural powers which can be acquired through certain spiritual practices? That remains an open question to me—as do some of the issues mentioned in Radin’s book.

It's a quite common belief that human paranormal abilities are less evident in modern Western societies, as a consequence of processes of civilization (technologization, alienation from nature, etc.). Because of this, the view on foreign cultures with a non-Western worldview is often attractive for Western parapsychological researchers (and not only for them), and winged by the hope that there is something new to be learned about the possibility of studying paranormal phenomena. The anecdotal reports of such phenomena occurring, for example, in shamanic societies, in South American countries such as Brazil, or in Hindu and Buddhist cultures, are fascinating and stimulating (cf. Bozzano 1941, David-Néel 1933, Playfair 1975, and many more). It was one of my expectations to obtain further information—both ample and scientifically sound—about paranormal phenomena in a non-Western culture. This was because the book's title and subtitle suggest this with its explicit reference to yoga, and to extraordinary abilities. This expectation unfortunately was not fulfilled. The book is largely about the results of Western parapsychological (experimental) research as well as the particular problems with regard to how the scientific community deals with the results of this research. First and foremost, the *Yoga Sūtras* written by the Indian sage Patañjali, and particularly the *siddhis*, build a contextual framework for the presentation of the above-mentioned main issues.

The book is divided into three main parts entitled *From Legendary Yoga Superpowers* (Part I, 7 chapters, 115 pages), *To Modern Science* (Part II, 7 chapters, 167 pages), and *And Beyond* (Part III, 2 chapters, 34 pages). This sounds conclusive, and suggests a coherent line of development from the past to the present age and into the future, which seems to be reflected in a clear outline of the volume. But this association is slightly misleading because the chapters of the first as well as the last part are much more heterogeneous with regard to their content than the chapters of the second part. Chapters 2, 6, and 7 directly refer to the yogic tradition, and its transmission and reception in the Western world during the 20th and 21st centuries. The latter is a core chapter for the author, insofar as he lists the twenty-five *siddhis*, describes them briefly, and tries to relate them to the well-known Western categories of psi (telepathy, clairvoyance, psychokinesis, precognition, retrocognition, and, as a less common category, exceptional mind-body control). The other chapters deal with shamanism, psychedelics, and extreme sports ("Other Realities"), with mysticism, marvelous stories, medical miracles, and skeptics ("Mysticism and Miracles"), and with current taboos and beliefs represented and promoted by mainstream science as well as by skeptics ("Unbelievable"). The two chapters of the third part are entitled "Pragmatics" and "Future Human." The first chapter includes

a description of a series of experiments on precognition with a technique called associative remote viewing. The pragmatic aspect lies in the chosen field of application: The Ironman triathlon competitor Gregor Kolodziejzyk tried to “Beat Wall Street” (p. 287) in these experiments (and he was successful!). There is an account of a crime being solved by a psychic detective in the year 2012. These two short reports should demonstrate that human psi capabilities are not only of interest with regard to ontological or spiritual issues but also could be used to cope with everyday problems. The last chapter of the third part takes up some points mentioned in the first part of the book: the faults and shortcomings of the dominant worldview of the West based on the assumptions of mainstream science, as well as a ‘new’ view which takes the provocative statements of quantum theory seriously. Radin systematizes his critique of the ‘mainstream approach to reality’ by listing “eight doctrinal assumptions that underlie the present scientific view of reality” (p. 298). He called them “the eightfold path of science.” With this, he refers directly to the “Noble Eightfold Path” of the teachings of the Buddha which contains eight elements of ‘right’ behaviour. In contrast, the “eightfold path of science” is not noble at all but contains eight incorrect doctrines, as Radin demonstrates, mainly by arguing with the results of quantum-theory-oriented research. He speculates on the ‘function’ consciousness may have as a kind of glue: “. . . could consciousness be a fundamental force in the universe that binds and shapes how the universe manifests?” (p. 312).

The main part of the book which impressed me as most scientifically sound and valid is dedicated to different areas of parapsychological research: precognition, telepathy, psychokinesis in living and in inanimate systems, and clairvoyance. Two further chapters deal with the question of how *siddhis* could be scientifically tested (“Science and the Siddhis”), and of the influence of meditation on the results of psi experiments (“Psi and Meditation”). With the former, Radin associates different psi research areas to yogic practices and presents cases of the investigation of “intermediate big siddhis (. . .): the ability to raise the body’s core temperature to allow one to comfortably remain in snow and ice without clothing, and to no longer eat food” (p. 123). There are a few people who demonstrated such abilities



and then underwent scientific investigation. Obviously, the overview on parapsychological research with its different areas, methodological problems, and experimental paradigms is not complete. The author doesn't want to bore the reader with the dry reading of a textbook with equally weighted and structured chapters. So, for example, the chapter on clairvoyance is very short. Radin refers to his earlier books *The Conscious Universe* (1997) and *Entangled Minds* (2006) which include a more comprehensive description of research in this area. In *Supernormal* he confines himself to two cases of "extreme clairvoyance" (title of the subchapter), and to a case of remote viewing. Areas that formed the focus of research of the author himself, together with his collaborators, are described in more detail. And there is a huge number of intriguing studies with interesting results. Radin belongs to a group of successful and efficient experimental parapsychologists, as most of readers of this journal already know. Despite the fact that he focuses somewhat on his own research, it is not a self-congratulatory report. For him, the content and issues of his work seem to be more important than any image cultivation. In addition to experimental results, the author explains methodological and statistical issues such as the method of meta-analyses, the meaning of the effect sizes, and the use of Bayesian techniques for analyzing experimental data. Part II of the book is primarily dedicated to answering the question of whether there is "scientific support for the ontological reality of the mystical realities underlying most religions" (p. xxi) and whether the yoga superpowers, the *siddhis*, are actually real, or only to be interpreted on a symbolic level.

Supernormal is a well-written, easily readable, and informative book which provides a good overview on the major objectives of experimental parapsychology. Sometimes the presentation of the results of the parapsychological research sounds smoother and more streamlined than is actually the case. But this does not alter the fact that it clearly shows how much the evidence for the existence of paranormal phenomena has grown. This can only be ignored by hard-nosed skeptics. Moreover, the book gives a lively display of the problems that are encountered by serious researchers in the field of parapsychology when they want to publish their significant results, as well as the resistance encountered in getting the evidence accepted, and the irrational reactions of most of the scientific community when confronted with such results. Therefore, I can fully recommend it. However, the question is: Who is the audience for this book?

Parapsychological researchers won't find very much new information. There is a considerable overlap with the two other mentioned books by Radin. Maybe the style of the book gives the answer. We find little pictures at the beginning of every chapter that remind me of fantasy comics. Deepak

Chopra contributed a Foreword to the book, in which he quotes Einstein: “Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind” (p. xiv), pointing toward the relationship of modern science and older spiritual traditions which both provide visionary looks into the future of humanity. In the case of *Supernormal* this is a fairly optimistic perspective. It promises the possibility of the development of new psychical hidden human capacities as well as a change in society. Radin speculates at the end of the book:

What might happen when this ancient–modern integration becomes a reality? On the beneficial side we can anticipate improved health care through a vastly better understanding of the mind–body relationship. We may see development of technologies that treat aspects of the mind–body system that are well understood in the wisdom traditions but are ignored by Western medicine (for the most part). . . . We may see a substantial reduction in interpersonal conflict through a broader recognition of the interconnectedness of all life. As the boundaries between subjective and objective realities are better understood, the communications and energy industries may be radically altered. On the other hand, we are likely to find that some aspects of the wisdom traditions are seriously distorted and in some cases are dangerously wrong. We may find growing societal resistance at the prospect of being “absorbed” into an increasingly powerful collective mind. And we may pass through a time when horrifically powerful weapons are created that reshape space–time and possibly even alter history. . . . From what I’ve seen in recent years, this transition has already begun. When it reaches fruition, humanity may finally find itself at childhood’s end. (p. 319)

With this vision of the future, it can be put in line with ‘classic’ New Age books such as, for example, Fritjof Capra’s popular scientifically written *The Tao of Physics* (1975), reaching a similarly interested readership.

However, if the reader wants to learn something profound about the particular relationship between psi and yoga, or better yet psi in yogic techniques, he won’t find a lot of solid information. The two main questions of the book are:

- a) Are the *siddhis* actually real? Answer: partly. This can be proved by the results of Western parapsychological research. Those ones that cannot be proved by scientific experiments are pure fantasy.
- b) How can it be that some of the *siddhis* are real? Answer: They are not miracles but are understandable with a new worldview informed by quantum theories, the relativity of time and space, and the meaning of consciousness.

A big question that remains unanswered is the one I quoted at the beginning of this review, and I want to come back to the introductory example of the German fakir: Could his capabilities be understood in line with that of

Indian *sādhus*? Further questions pop up: What role does the spiritual context play with regard to a correct understanding of what really happens? Could psi phenomena, detected in the laboratory of parapsychologists, justifiably be identified with the *siddhis* of the *Yoga Sūtras*? Is it correct to adopt the explanations found for such psi phenomena to explain the *siddhis*? Are such *siddhis*, which are judged by Radin to be pure fantasy, based on the fact that they don't fit into the scheme and concepts of Western parapsychological research? And what about the widespread assumption that psi capabilities cannot be trained (based on quantum theoretical considerations), which is contradictory to the *Yoga Sūtras* that “tell us that the development of the *siddhis* is intimately related to yoga practice, and in particular to the meditation component of yoga” (p. 274). Is a quantum theory model—the only theoretical model the author mentions in his book—the one and only one to explain the *siddhis* as well as psi phenomena in Western laboratories? It is only possible to speculate on answers to these questions, of course. But in this matter Radin largely leaves the readership alone regarding further reflections and arguments—unfortunately (in my view).

Note

¹ <http://wissen.spiegel.de/wissen/image/show.html?did=44435235&ref=image036/2005/12/13/sp19490327-T2P-027.pdf&thumb=false>
[Translation in the text of this review by the author]

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