

The Magical Understanding of Good and Evil

When walking a magical path the practitioner soon comes up against issues of good v evil, duality of power, left hand/right hand path etc which can bring to the surface a great many questions that we have to ask of ourselves and those involved in the particular magical path that we are walking. I feel it is important for us as magicians to step outside of the dogmas and beliefs inherent within our culture and society, which are often deep seated and not immediately apparent to us. By doing so it enables us to ascertain what is actually happening, why, and how to find a way to navigate through issues in a way that compliments who we are and what we are trying to achieve

What we perceive as good or evil largely depends on our system of beliefs, be they religious, cultural, philosophical etc, and our own emotional development. It also is deeply affected by our own needs both in personal development and every day living.

Our systems of belief and the wider religious/cultural pattern in which we were born and raised in have a massive effect upon how we view the world. As children we accept such dogmas without question, particularly if raised in a religious household. As teens we rebel against such dogmas and begin the process of questioning. Often though, the questioning element of our personal development can become limited by a continued unconscious adherence to the dogmatic pattern which results in not a breaking away from the pattern, but a continuing rebellion against a dogma which in turn feeds and strengthens it.

We can see this for example in the work of Crowley. I am not an expert on Crowley by any means, and am commenting from the outside looking in. But it is an example that is known by most people in the magical arena. Crowley was raised in a very strict, and unhealthy Christian household that was mired in the sexually and behaviour repressed Victorian era. Crowley struck out to try and become the opposite of what he had been raised in. This eventually brought about a huge change in thinking, but his reasoning was still mired within the dogma of Christianity, just from an opposing point of view.

At that time, I think it would have been near on impossible for someone of his time, culture and background to have completely stepped out of that pattern. But in his struggle, whether we agree with it or not, he and others like him opened doors that our generation no longer has to bother with and yet many branches of magic still cling to that outworn pattern. And there in lies one of the problems: we have become so used to working and evolving within the pattern that we forget that we are now able to step outside of the pattern rather than being the antithesis of the pattern. We become stuck in the white magician, black magician, left hand and right hand path mentality.

So how do we operate? I think the first thing for a magician is to know their own personal limitations of what they are and are not willing to do and take responsibility for. On one hand, the more 'spiritually' inclined magician is likely to have a set of heroic ethics that they vigorously defend, often without direct experience, and postulate to others about. Over time, with the dedication of a magical path, the magician is then put into a variety of life situations that directly challenge not only the

validity of those ethics, but also the ability of the individual to make more informed decisions regarding their ethics. Some are realised to be empty shells of dogmatic or fanciful beliefs, and some are discovered to be of vast importance. That distinction also strengthens the magician and enables them to uphold the important ethics in the face of extreme challenge.

Slowly, the ethics or concepts that may be considered admirable in many societies are put to the practical test and many fall by the wayside as the magician realises their futility. Others prove to be difficult to uphold, but wonderful boundaries that bring out the best in someone. This is a filter mechanism that most of us have been through in one way or another, so that when we emerge battered and still standing a few decades later, we have a much more realistic idea of what we can and cannot do, and more importantly what we truly are willing or not willing to do to survive. The high ideals we started with are tested to the extreme until we are either destroyed, or we have learned to understand which ethics, boundaries and limitations are actually really necessary, and which are just egotistic vanity.

It is easy to stand in judgement of someone from a safe vantage point and feel good about ourselves. But once fate tosses us to the ravages of harsh life, then we begin to feel a lot more compassion and understanding for those whom we observe to be struggling against themselves or their society. We know, because we have been there - understanding the hardship involved in true survival becomes a lantern to light our path.

Similarly in the other direction, following a magical path of selfishness, of using power purely and unashamedly for the pursuit of wants and needs gives freedom to the magician who has lived in a stifling society. Self indulgence and self preservation give a person a sense of power, a sense of control over our own lives and destinies. We gain a sense of our own power and importance. Until it begins to go wrong - the dawning of how limited we are, and how wants and needs do not fill a greater sense of identity nor do they teach us truly about power. Our addictions begin to rule and then destroy us, to weaken and expose the false sense of security that was gained. A magician walking this path will either begin to develop their own unique self containment, ethics and understanding, or they will implode.

For myself, I began my magical path as a teenager in the 1970's with a terrible sense of self righteousness. In my early twenties I asked the inner contacts for learning, for wisdom, for experience (not always such a great idea). I certainly got what I asked for and was thrown to the wolves. Every pedestal I took delight in standing upon was knocked over until I understood the dilemmas of those I had so arrogantly looked down upon in my youth. It is a terribly hard long and painful lesson, but that is what magic does. It confronts you. Eventually I learned and am still learning to look beyond the 'pattern' of what I personally consider 'ethical', and to recognise my own weaknesses and failures in the cold hard light of day. I realise now this process will never end, which is good as it means we can constantly grow, evolve and learn.

Knowing our own personal limitations is a very important part of the development of magic within us and has great bearing upon how we wield that magic. The rules of engagement in life are the same for magic, from the small aspects to the greatest ones. So for example, eating meat. It is easy to buy a prepacked, chopped and ready to cook

bit of meat. It is not so easy to look into the eyes of an animal and watch it die by your own hands. In rich first world countries, many people say, “I could not kill an animal, but I eat meat”, or they will say ‘I could not kill an animal therefore I am vegan’. It is a statement that is easy to make in some first world countries where there is a financial social safety net, and also access to vegetarian protein sources - although some may go hungry from time to time, people in such countries do not die of starvation. We have that choice and often choose not to kill – our ethics are a product of our living circumstances.

But put in a situation in a country where there is no social safety net, and you are very hungry, your children are hungry and if you do not kill an animal you may starve, then it is a different matter. Your ethics change according to your circumstances. So they are not really ethics at all, but social and hierarchical expressions.

The will to survive is all encompassing. It does not make the killing any easier, but it makes it necessary: that is the reality, the true reality of nature that we are often protected from in modern society. That luxury enables us to be ‘ethical’: but magic begins when we know our true limitations, we know what we are really capable of doing, both for good and bad under extreme circumstances. Then and only then can we begin to understand power in a magical context: we learn about it through knowing our own true limitations, and then we can learn how to navigate our way through the maze.

So it is back to good and evil. What do those words actually mean anyway? We bandy them around in religion, in spirituality and in magical paths. But do we really understand what they mean? What is evil? Is it evil to maim and kill? Is it evil to destroy? It all depends on where you are in context to the power. As humans, we find genocide against other humans as intolerable, evil incarnate. But we commit such acts without thought on a regular basis against other creatures. Is mass murder evil? If someone kills a load of seals, or ponies or kittens, we consider that unacceptable. But if they are cows or pigs, then that serves our purpose and is therefore acceptable. So evil in reality is something we do not like to happen to us either as individuals or as a species. For us it is hard to differentiate between what is necessary destruction and unnecessary destruction. Necessary destruction is a part of nature, unnecessary destruction is the closest we can truly come to understanding the complexity of what is truly evil.

High or powerful magic is like wielding nuclear power; it can do great damage over a long period of time. The power itself is neither good nor evil, but its use can have devastating effects regardless of the intention behind it. It is a dangerous tool and the more power a magician is able to access the more damage or good they can potentially do with it. How that power is applied is directly related to how that magician perceives themselves and the world around them.

Because of that dynamic, what often happens is the more potential for power that a magician has, the greater their life experiences will be in order to bring them to a relative mature place, or to switch them off – a bit like blowing a fuse. Those who do not have the capacity for mediating large amounts of power tend to have a more stable constant life experience (unless of course they have already got their shit together). This dynamic seems to run in relation to the capacity of the person/path for power.

It is something that has happened to me and something I have also observed many times over in other magicians. There is no sense of any paternalistic teaching parent god/s in the dynamic; it is more a matter of power in, power out, in the weave of life. The trick is to recognise what is happening and engage the process for learning and strengthening, rather than flailing around in the dark and cursing the gods. (been there, done that)

When the dynamic first really kicked in for me, I was horrified that suddenly life was throwing me big balls of shit on a daily basis that was beyond silly. Luckily there was an elder magician around in my wider community that pointed out to me that every damn thing I was going through was directly challenging me on my stance of ethics, of understanding, and of limitations.

That was a major turning point not only in my coping strategy, but also in my magical understanding and development. I began to engage directly with each challenge in order to draw what I could from the situations and turn them in to learning curves, strengthening exercises and humble pie eating sessions. The more I engaged, the wider the door of magical contact became. I began to see the ‘bad’ side of life and magic as something that balanced out and polished the ‘good’ side. I began to see the dynamic of how creative magical power needed to exist in the presence of destructive magical power so instead of trying to get rid of the bad power, it is merely balanced out by a creative power and visa versa.

Like everything else, you can read about something or be taught about something until the cows come home, but the true deeper meanings and the visceral understanding of magic cannot really take seed and grow until it is a direct learning experience. So for example this article is not really written to teach, not even to burble about my own opinions/expressions, but to open the door as that elder did for me once and say, “hey its ok don’t panic, this is what is happening and this is how you deal with it to survive”. It is a path that thousands have trodden before us and knowing that it is a path that can not only be survived, but will bring you to a wonderful dawning of deep magic is a lifeline that can light your way in the darkest of times.

© Josephine McCarthy 1993-2019

These texts are fully copyrighted and here for personal use only. You may not copy, redistribute or publish these texts without permission of the author.