

JAN WESTERHOFF



TWELVE EXAMPLES
OF ILLUSION

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OF ILLUSION**

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Once upon a time there was a king in India. An astrologer told him: "Whoever shall drink the rain which falls seven days from now shall go mad." So the king covered his well, that none of the water may enter it. All of his subjects, however, drank the water, and went mad, while the king alone remained sane. Now the king could no longer understand what his subjects thought and did, nor could his subjects understand what the king thought and did. All of them shouted "The king is mad, the king is mad." Thus, having no choice, the king drank the water too.

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INTRODUCTION

A CERTAIN Tibetan encyclopedia called *A Feast for the Intelligent Mind*¹ lists twelve examples of illusion as follows:

- | | |
|---------------------------|-------------------------------|
| I. Magical illusions | VII. A city of Gandharvas |
| II. The moon in the water | VIII. Optical illusions |
| III. Visual distortions | IX. Rainbows |
| IV. Mirages | X. Lightning |
| V. Dreams | XI. Water bubbles |
| VI. Echoes | XII. A reflection in a mirror |

The author of this encyclopedia, the eighteenth-century Tibetan scholar Könchog Jigme Wangpo,² saw the world as a collection of lists. A well-read and prolific writer like his previous incarnation, he set himself the task of enumerating all the objects that come in pairs, all that come in triples, in sets of four, five, six, or more.

Among other things his encyclopedia tells us about the **two** truths (the absolute and relative truth), the **three** sweet substances (crystalline sugar, sugar-cane juice, and honey), three pursuits of the learned (explanation, debate, and composition), the **four** languages of India (Sanskrit, Prakrit, Apabhraṃśa, and Piśāci³), the four kinds of desire between men and women (the desire to gaze upon, the desire to laugh, the desire to hold

1. Its full title is མདོ་རྒྱུད་བསྟན་བཅོས་དུ་མ་ནས་འབྲུང་བའི་ཚོས་ཀྱི་ནམ་གྲངས་ཤེས་ཡན་ཡིད་ཀྱི་དགའ་སྟོན་ཤེས་བྱ་བ་; that is, “An Enumeration of Things Taken from Many Sūtras, Tantras, and Śāstras, called A Feast for the Intelligent Mind.”

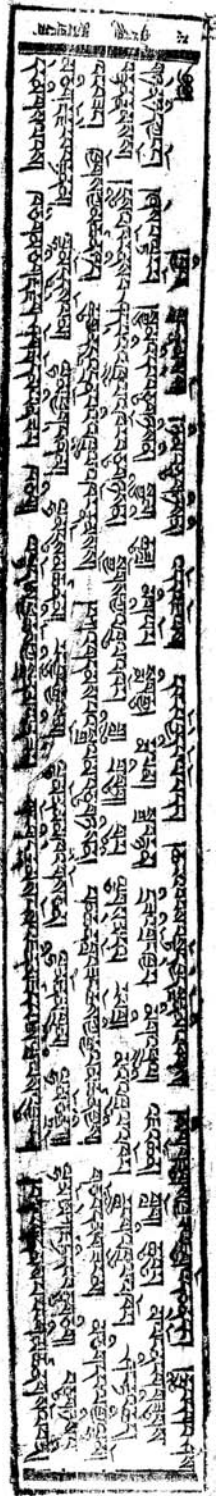
2. དཀོན་མཆོག་འཇིགས་མེད་དབང་པོ་, 1728–1791.

3. Piśāci or Paisāci is the only language of the four without an extant corpus. The *piśāca* constitute a class of flesh-eating demons, and Piśāci is sometimes regarded as their specific medium of communication. It is more likely, however, that the speakers of Piśāci were actually human, possibly members of an Indian aboriginal tribe regarded as “savages” or “demons.”



Könchog Jigme Wangpo

hands, the desire to copulate), the **five** gifts of the cow (urine, dung, milk, butter, curd), the **six** tastes of medicine (sweet, sour, bitter, astringent, hot, and salty), the **seven** parts of an elephant (first leg, second leg, third leg, fourth leg, tail, testicles, trunk), seven constituents of the body (blood, flesh, fat, bone, marrow, semen, and water), the **eight** aspects of water (cool, light, tasty, smooth, clear, without smell, pleasing to the throat, not harmful to the stomach), and the eight grammatical cases (nominative, accusative, instrumental, dative, ablative, genitive, locative, and vocative).



A particularly intriguing piece among the many treasures of this wonder-house of a Tibetan encyclopedia is the list of the twelve examples of illusion. Kōnchog Jigme Wangpo drew these twelve examples from texts usually classified by Buddhist scholars under the heading “Perfection of Wisdom” or *Prajñāpāramitā* in Sanskrit. The first texts of this sort were probably written in southern India during the first century BCE; their composition continued for the following millenium. They range in length from enormous compendia like the *Perfection of Wisdom in 100,000 Lines* (which amounts to more than a million words of English) to versions that fill a normal-sized volume, such as the *Perfection of Wisdom in 8,000 Lines*, or just a single page, like the famous Heart Sutra, and finally to the ultimately abbreviated recensions in texts like the *Perfection of Wisdom in One Letter*, which consists just of the letter ཨ.

The Perfection of Wisdom texts are notoriously difficult to understand and tend to make the most startling claims. Here is an extract from the *Heart Sutra*.

Matter is emptiness, and emptiness itself is matter. Matter is not distinct from emptiness, and emptiness is not distinct from matter. . . . All things are marked by emptiness, not arisen, not ceased, not pure, not defiled, not diminishing, not increasing. In emptiness . . . there is no eye, no ear, no nose, no tongue, no body, no mind, no shape, no sound, no smell, no taste, nothing to be touched and nothing to be thought of. . . . There is no knowledge, no ignorance, no ending of ignorance, no ending of old age and death, there is no suffering, no cessation of suffering, no path leading to this cessation, there is no wisdom, there is no attainment, and no non-attainment either.

Page showing the list of the twelve examples of illusion (lines 2–3)



Personification of
the Perfection of
Wisdom

Despite their great difficulty and often cryptic style, these texts became so popular that the Perfection of Wisdom was soon personified. Since “Prajñāpāramitā” is a feminine Sanskrit noun, she is depicted in female form. The Tibetan tradition represents her with four arms; the two outer arms hold a book (as befits the personification of wisdom) and a rosary, or sometimes a scepterlike object called a *vajra*, derived from the thunderbolt of the Vedic god Indra and generally regarded as a sign of permanence and indestructibility. Her other two hands are sometimes folded in her lap in the gesture of meditation, holding a vase filled with the nectar of immortality. In the depiction represented here Prajñāpāramitā holds her hands in front of her chest in the gesture of teaching.

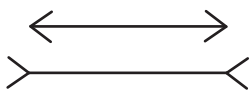
The examples of illusion Kōnchog Jigme Wangpo has collected are only some of those used in the various texts on the Perfection of Wisdom to stress the illusory nature of all phenomena. One of the most famous of them all, the *Diamond Sutra*,⁴ concludes with the lines:

4. Incidentally, a Chinese translation of this text kept in the British Library is also the oldest printed book bearing a date. It was printed on 11 May 868.

*Like stars, like an optical illusion, like a lamp,
like a magical illusion, dewdrops, or a bubble,
like a dream, a flash of lightning or a cloud,
so all that is produced is to be seen.*

The optical and magical illusions, the bubble, and the dream also occur in our list; others, like the lamp, the dewdrops, and the cloud, are new. Other texts mention still further examples: an empty fist, an illusory flower appearing in the sky, a shadow, a plantain tree.⁵

Discussing illusions plays such a big role in the Perfection of Wisdom literature because the Buddhist texts state that there is a close connection between the existence of illusion and the existence of suffering. According to the Buddhist worldview, the existence of suffering is neither a necessary feature of the world nor the consequence of a specific fact about the past (such as the fall of Adam), but is rather due to an intellectual error that is mistaken about the way things exist. Suffering is produced by a wrong view of the world, a view that is in fact so much part and parcel of our habitual way of thinking that we are not aware of its perspectival nature any more.⁶ More worryingly, the mere intellectual insight into its falsity does not mean that the illusion goes away, in the same way that the mere intellectual insight that the two lines in the diagram below are of the same length does not alter the fact that the lower line *appears* to be longer.



The Müller-Lyer Illusion

As this example shows, an illusion is not something that does not exist, but something that is not what it seems. A cloud that might appear as soft as a white down pillow, as thick as a dark wall, or as far-reaching as the golden sands of the desert when illuminated by the setting sun is really nothing of the sort; in fact it is little more than the thin air into which it will soon disappear.

The aim of the Buddhist enterprise is therefore not just to show that all things are like illusions because the way they appear is different from the way they are. Its aim is to bring about a complete change in how we perceive and

5. The plantain tree (*musa paradisiaca*) is in fact an herb with large leaves, the overlapping bases of which form a false trunk. Even though this gives the impression of being a solid stem, it is in fact nothing but a mass of tightly rolled leaves.

6. The philosopher Thomas Metzinger calls such a view of the world “transparent”: “A conscious world-model active in the brain is transparent if the brain has no chance of discovering that it is a model—one looks right through it, directly onto the mind, as it were.”

conceptualize phenomena. In this way ignorance is cleared away and, one hopes, suffering will completely disappear.

Before getting there, however, it is essential to understand what precisely makes an illusory phenomenon illusory. The twelve examples of illusion listed by Könchog Jigme Wangpo suggest some fascinating examples for addressing this issue and allow us to clarify our ideas about the relation between reality, appearance, perception, deception, and illusion. To their discussion we will now turn.

I shall discuss each example in a separate chapter and will explain what the Indian and Tibetan authors had in mind by using a variety of illustrations from different disciplines, including contemporary philosophy and cognitive science, as well as the history of science, optics, artificial intelligence, geometry, economics, and literary theory. However, I do not expect the reader to have any previous knowledge of any of these and have included a number of pictures and diagrams to make things as clear as possible. Each example throws light on a different aspect of illusion, but the different chapters do not presuppose one another; one can therefore read them in any order. I have tried to keep the text as free as possible from footnotes and technical details. References to all my sources are given at the end of the book; here I also suggest some books suitable for the general reader who wants to learn more about particular topics I discussed.

This book does not come with a conclusion. It is not a textbook on Buddhist philosophy, and I have not tried to defend any particular writer's take on the sources I discuss, not even my own. I encourage the reader to make up her own mind. She will gain most insight by thinking herself about which aspect of illusion each example illustrates, how they all hang together, and which view of the world they support.

MAGIC



THE TOWN of Śrāvastī, nowadays called Sahet-Mahet, is a thoroughly unremarkable place in northern India where, some not particularly spectacular ruins apart, very little is to be seen.

Nevertheless, two and a half millenia ago some extraordinary events could be witnessed there. This was the time when the Indian prince Siddharta, now, after his enlightenment, known as the Buddha, was staying at Śrāvastī. The gardener of King Prasenajit, a man called Gaṇḍa, had just presented the Buddha with a delicious mango. After eating it the Buddha told Gaṇḍa to plant the seed of the mango fruit. Then

the Teacher washed his hands over the place where the mango had been planted. The very moment he washed his hands, a mango-tree sprung up, with stalks as thick as a plow-handle, fifty cubits in height. Five great branches shot forth, each fifty cubits in length, four to the four cardinal points and one to the heavens above. Instantly the tree was covered with flowers and fruits; indeed on one side it bore a cluster of ripe mangoes. Approaching from behind, the monks picked the ripe mangoes, ate them, and then withdrew. When the king heard that a mango-tree so wonderful had sprung up, he gave orders that no one should cut it down, and posted a guard. Because the tree had been planted by the gardener Gaṇḍa, it became known as Gaṇḍa's Mango-tree.

This episode is depicted on a stone relief from Bharhut in Madhya Pradesh dating from the third or second century BCE, known as the Ajatashatru pillar. According to the pictorial conventions of the time the Buddha is not shown in human form but represented by an empty throne. Surrounding him are crowds of worshippers admiring the mango tree so wondrously produced.

What is particularly remarkable about this story is the fact that the miracle displayed here by the Buddha, the so-called "mango trick," is a piece of magic



Map showing the location of Śrāvastī

that is still being performed in India. It is one of the most venerable feats of Indian conjuring, second only to the famous (and infamous) Indian rope trick. Here is a description by a German traveler from the first half of the twentieth century; the performance described is not quite as spectacular as the Buddha's feat, but is still impressive.

An apprentice poured a heap of reddish earth, about a foot high, on a piece of cloth in front of the magician. He took the fresh seed of a mango from a not-too-clean bag and showed it to the spectators. Carefully he placed it in the earth, poured some water on it, covered it with a cloth and took a doll from his bag. A whispered conversation with the mysterious thing followed. It was then placed on the cloth and the magician told us in bad English that without the doll the trick could not be performed. After all of this he piped a strange melody on his flute, all the time rocking his emaciated body to and fro. And indeed! Slowly, very slowly the cloth began to move. It rose inch by inch, carrying the doll with it. The Englishman next to me hissed "That's all fake." Three minutes passed. Nobody had touched the cloth. When it was about ten inches high, the apprentice lifted it up. A light-green little mango tree was beneath it! Its long, pointed leaves were still rolled up, but as the magician continued playing his flute they unfolded in front of our eyes. "Oh, how interesting," the Englishman remarked.



Relief showing the mango tree miracle (lower section)

Although the Buddha and the anonymous Ceylonese magician perform what is essentially the same trick, there is a noticeable difference in quality. Moreover, the Buddha's performance just gave a taste of the extraordinary show of miracles that was to follow it on that day in Śrāvastī. We read of the Buddha rising into the air, creating a levitating jeweled walk, of flames blazing around his shoulders and water gushing from his feet. All of this is followed by yet another fascinating event.

Since the Teacher saw in that vast throng none other than himself who understood his mind and could ask him questions, he put forth his supernatural power and created a double; the double then asked him questions and the Teacher answered them.⁷

The idea of the creation of an illusory person excited the Indian philosophical thinkers to a considerable extent. One particular form of this magical performance is referred to again and again in the Buddhist philosophical literature. Although it sounds quite spectacular, if we are to trust the

7. The ability to produce an illusory double of oneself (called *manomaya iddhi* in Pali) as a power supposedly obtained by meditation is already mentioned in the earliest Buddhist writings, such as the *Sāmaññaphalasutta* of the *Dīghanikāya* and the *Mahāsakuludāyisutta* of the *Majjhimanikāya*. For a contemporary scenario involving the creation of virtual doubles see Thomas Metzinger, "The Ego Tunnel", New York, Basic Books, 2009, pp. 98–101.



Magician performing the mango trick

sources one does not have to be a Buddha to bring it about; any ordinary magician will do. Here is what happens.

The conjurer takes some everyday object, such as a piece of wood and shows it to the audience. He then says some mantra or spell, as a result of which the piece of wood appears to the audience as something else: as a chariot, a horse, or an elephant, as a man or as a beautiful woman. The Tibetan philosopher Gyal tshab je⁸ describes it as follows in a text called *Essence of Good Explanation*:⁹

For instance, the men and women conjured by an illusionist cause the spectators of the magic, who think of them as men and women, to feel attraction and aversion. Though they also appear to the magician, he does not think of them in this way. They do not even appear to those who are unaffected by the spell.

The audience of the magic trick will no longer see the piece of wood but only the beautiful woman and, considering her to be real, will feel attracted to her. The magician himself, interestingly enough, is also under the thrall of his own spells: he does not see a piece of wood either, but the woman

8. ལྷུལ་ཚལ་དང་མ་རིན་ཆེན་, 1364–1432. Gyal tshab was a famous disciple of Je Tsongkhapa (རྗེ་ཚོང་ཁ་པ་), the founder of the Gelug (དགེ་ལུགས་) school. Gyal tshab was the first Ganden Tripa (དགེ་ལུགས་ཀྱི་དཔལ་) or Holder of the Throne of Ganden. This is the spiritual head of the Gelug school, a position of lesser power than the Dalai Lama but of higher spiritual rank. The Ganden Tripas are appointed and therefore do not constitute a reincarnation lineage. The present Ganden Tripa is the 101st in the succession.

9. The full title of this text is བཞི་བརྒྱ་པོའི་རྣམ་པ་གྲུབ་ལཱ་ལ་བཞུགས་པའི་སྤྱི་བཤེན་; it is a commentary on Āryadeva's (second to third century) *Four Hundred Verses (Catuḥśataka)*. The passage in question comments on the twenty-fifth verse of the fifteenth chapter.



Gyal tshab je

as which it appears. Nevertheless he is not completely taken in by the illusion. He *knows* that she is his own creation and can be made to disappear at will. Therefore, one assumes, she does not appear to him quite as attractive (or at least not as attractive in the same way) as to the rest of the audience. The innocent bystanders, finally, who came too late and have not heard the mantra and have therefore failed to be drawn under a spell, see no woman at all. All that appears to them is a crowd of people lecherously eyeing up a piece of wood.¹⁰

The Tibetans, heavily influenced by Indian culture through the transmission of Buddhism from India, seem to have shared the Indian fascination with illusory persons. They came up with the two related concepts of a *tulku* (ལྷུ་སྐྱེ) and a *tulpa* (ལྷུ་ལ་པ་).

“*Tul*” (ལྷུ་) means something magically created or an emanation; “*ku*” (སྐྱེ) means body. Reincarnations of famous teachers are referred to by the term *tulku*, as are emanations of various figures of the Tibetan pantheon. The Dalai Lama is a *tulku* in both senses, as he is both the incarnation of his respective predecessor and an emanation of Chenrezi (ལྷུན་རྒྱལ་ལ་ཞེས་པ་), the bodhisattva of compassion. Encountering a *tulku* is not that rare, as there are very many of them around, old and young ones, male and (a few) female ones, some extremely famous and some extremely obscure. Nor is it a particularly mysterious experience, as everybody agrees that apart from their particular spiritual origin *tulkus* are all human beings with human bodies like the rest of us.

Tulpas, on the other hand, are relatively rare (if they exist at all) and are also quite strange phenomena. (“*Pa*” (པ་) is just a nominalizing particle, so *tulpa* can best be translated as “magically created creature.”) A *tulpa* is a being that often, but not necessarily, is human in appearance (it might also be an animal, a tree, or suchlike) and that is created purely by someone’s mind. A *tulpa* is different from a merely imagined being in that it can be seen *by other people* as well, and in that it may also acquire a certain degree

10. We might want to note that this trick could also be performed in reverse. Instead of using a piece of wood to create what is not there, it could also be used to hide what was there. Holding on to such a magically potent stick (called བཞིབ་ལྗང་ in Tibetan), generally taken from the nest of a crow, magpie, or owl, on which *mantras* had been spoken, allowed the bearer to become invisible.

of independence: when the creator wants to dissolve the *tulpa* it might not disappear immediately.

A very detailed report about the creation of a *tulpa* has come down to us. Interestingly, it is not due to a Tibetan, but comes from a French lady, the explorer Alexandra David-Néel. She claims to have spent three years during the 1910s studying at the Kumbum monastery (ལྷོ་འབྲུག་བྱམས་པ་གླིང་) in Amdo in eastern Tibet.

During her time there, she claims, she created a *tulpa* herself. This she gave the form of a monk, “short and fat, and of an innocent and jolly type.” Shutting herself up in a secluded place she

proceeded to perform the prescribed concentration of thought and other rites. After a few months the phantom monk was formed. His form grew gradually *fixed* and life-like looking. He became a kind of guest, living in my rooms. I then broke my seclusion and started for a tour, with my servants and tents. The monk included himself in the party. Though I lived in the open, riding on horseback for miles each day, the illusion persisted. I saw the fat *trapa* [ལྷ་པ་, a monk] now and then; it was not necessary for me to think of him to make him appear. . . . Once, a herdsman who brought me a present of butter saw the tulpa in my tent and took it for a live lama. . . . [Finally] I decided to dissolve the phantom. I succeeded, but only after six months of hard struggle. My mind-creature was tenacious of life.

Given the many references to the creation of illusory persons by magic both in Buddhist philosophical writings from India and Tibet as well as in other sources such as David-Néel’s memoir it is tempting to speculate what, if any, basis in fact this might have. Were there Indian conjurers nearly two thousand years ago capable of performing illusions that would baffle most



Kumbum monastery before its destruction



Alexandra David-Neél at Kumbum

contemporary stage magicians? Was Alexandra David-Néel? And, if so, how did they do it?

We find an interesting description of the technique presumably employed by the Buddha in the creation of his imaginary interlocutor in the *Visuddhimagga*,¹¹ a voluminous Buddhist commentarial work.

One who wants to make the mind-made body should emerge from the basic *jhāna* [meditation] and advert to the body in the way already described, and then he should resolve “Let it be hollow.” It becomes hollow. Then he adverts to another body inside it, and having done the preliminary work in the way already described, he resolves “Let there be another body inside it.” Then he draws it out like a reed from a sheath, like a sword from its scabbard, like a snake from its slough.

Although this description will presumably not enable us to try this out at home immediately, it deals with the creation of illusory bodies in a refreshingly matter-of-fact way. In this respect it is quite unlike attempts at theorizing we find in some modern writers such as W.Y. Evans-Wentz, chiefly known nowadays for bringing out the first translation of the *Bardo Thodöl* (བར་དོ་ཐོས་སྒྲུབ་, the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*). According to him the trick is “changing the body’s rate of vibration,” inhibiting the “emanation of its radioactivity,” or, alternatively, “exuding ectoplasm.”

11. Its author, Buddhaghosa, lived in the fifth century.

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