



## ARTICLES

# Encountering the Supernatural

## A Phenomenological Account of Mind

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■ **ABSTRACT:** In this article we compare the encounter with the supernatural—experiences in which a person senses the immaterial—in Thailand and in the United States. These experiences appear to be shaped by different conceptions of the mind. In the US, there is a sharp, natural division between one’s mind and the world; in Thailand, individuals have the moral responsibility to control their minds. These differences appear to explain how people identify and sense the supernatural. In the US, it is an external, responsive agent; in Thailand, it is an energy that escapes from an uncontrolled mind. Here we approach phenomenology—the experience of experience—comparatively, identifying patterns in social expectations that affect the ways in which humans think, feel, and sense. We take an experiential category of life that we know to be universal and use it to analyze cultural concepts that influence the enactment and interpretation of feeling and sensing.

■ **KEYWORDS:** energy, experience, ghosts, mind, phenomenology, senses, supernatural, Thailand

Phenomenology is the study of experience. More precisely, in the language of *Merriam-Webster*, it “describes the formal structure of the objects of awareness and of awareness itself in abstraction from any claims concerning existence.”<sup>1</sup> To study phenomenology is to give an account of the texture and feel of human experience—the experience of experience—and what Robert Desjarlais and Jason Throop (2011: 88) call “those unexamined assumptions that organize our prereflective engagements with reality.” Scholars do so for at least three reasons. The first two are well-known and in contradiction. We are motivated by the third.

The first reason to focus on phenomenology is to find new universals beneath the distracting surface of the variable. This is the impulse of the scientist. The scholar finds an experience that has a distinctive shape, characterizes and defines it, and seeks (eventually) to understand the bodily constraints that give rise to so remarkable a phenomenon. The classic example is William James’s (1902) account of the mystical experience in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. James set out example after example of what he took to be roughly the same phenomenon, which he



characterized as having four qualities: transience, passivity, ineffableness, and a noetic feeling. He was sure that he had found a particular event in the brain—and he was probably right. In the century after his death, other researchers, largely neuroscientists, have argued that they have found in these experiences the neurological correlates of God (Mandell 1980; Newberg et al. 2002). This kind of research has been remarkably productive. Another of its achievements has been the discovery of ‘sleep paralysis’ beneath the folklore of the ‘old hag’ and other tales. In recent years, scholars have realized that accounts of spirits that attack in the night, sometimes forcing sex upon unwilling victims, might stem from these periods of temporary immobility that occur on the edge of sleep, during which people experience themselves as awake but unable to move: they describe feeling a pressure upon their chests, having difficulty breathing, and being aware of a presence that is often seen or heard (Adler 2011; Cheyne and Girard 2004; Hinton et al. 2005; Hufford 1982).

The second reason to study phenomenology springs from a quite different impulse, that is, to upturn the reductionism that the first exemplifies.<sup>2</sup> The anthropologists in this tradition seek an anthropology true to the rich particularity of local life—the smell of the market, the cries of the spice seller, the warmth of the sun in the open air. In *The Taste of Ethnographic Things*, Paul Stoller (1989: 1) calls this a “return to the senses,” an effort to capture what intellectual analysis ignores. This is the writer’s impulse. These scholars speak of ‘lived’ experience. They want their readers to know that religion, for example, is not a brain blizzard or a list of propositional truths, that what participants remember from a religious ritual is the ‘feel’ of being there in that sensed emotional space. This, too, has been a most productive line of inquiry, as the evocative work of Stoller (1989, 1997), Desjarlais (1992, 2003), Michael Jackson (1995, 1998), and Thomas Csordas (1990, 1993) attests.

The third reason to study phenomenology is to look neither for underlying universals nor for local variation but for patterns in social expectations about experience that affect the way that humans think and feel and sense. This is the approach that we take here, and it is inherently comparative. We take an experiential category of human life that we know to be near-universal; we look at the way that it varies across cultural boundaries, keeping in mind that no comparison is exact; and we set out to understand why those differences exist by looking at the implicit social rules around the manner in which experience is known and felt. We look for cultural concepts that shape the enactment and interpretation of feeling and sensing in the way that neuroscientists look for the neuronal circuits that shape ecstasy. We argue here that one of the most important notions in anthropological phenomenology is the concept of mind.

In this article we set out a method by example. We compare experiences of the supernatural—something inferred to be present but without material form, something that is ‘real’ but not ‘natural’—and argue that the differences we find with regard to the experience of the supernatural in different social worlds can be explained, in part, by local understandings of mind and the way that the mind works, that is, how the mind knows, whether the mind is private or shared, whether moral knowing is different from natural perception. This work is focused on Thailand, but to make our argument clear, we use an anchor-point comparison with American undergraduates in order to sharpen our Thai characterizations. While anthropologists often do this implicitly, we are making the comparison explicit here simply because it helps us to think.

We began with a questionnaire that we have used in settings familiar to us. One of us (Julia Cassaniti) has spent years in Chiang Mai, a city in northern Thailand, first as a delighted tourist and then as a doctoral student. The other (Tanya Marie Luhrmann) is just completing a long-term project on the way that experientially oriented evangelical Christians experience God’s supernatural reality and how much these Christians have to learn in order to overcome their own reluctance to experience the supernatural in their minds. The survey helped us to hone our

observations by providing us with a contrast and a systematic prompt, but it would have been far less valuable without its authors' ethnographic knowledge. Simple surveys are limited-use instruments. This was ours:

Have you ever encountered something supernatural? [In the translation into Thai, something that's not human, like a human without a body, a spirit, an invisible being?]  
 How did you know?  
 Did you feel it on your skin?  
 Did you see it with your eyes?  
 Did you hear it with your ears?  
 Did you smell it?  
 Did you taste it?  
 Do you ever have an awareness that something is present even though you cannot see, hear, feel, smell, or taste it?  
 Do you think that other people usually experience the supernatural that way?  
 How do you know that the encounter was not just a human playing tricks on you?  
 Did you realize it at the time or only afterward?

And we asked people to give us an example.

## Thailand

Thailand is a Buddhist country teeming with supernatural beings.<sup>3</sup> There are ghosts (*phi*), souls (*winyan*), hungry ghosts (*prêt*), gods (*thewada*), and many other entities. The Thai see the supernatural landscape as abundant. As one woman remarked, "Ghosts here are not like in America, where there's 'zombies' and just a few like that. In Thailand there are *many*." In 2010, Cassaniti went to Chiang Mai to talk to people about the supernatural. There, with the help of Professor Kob Pussadee, her colleague at Chiang Mai University, she translated the survey into Thai and distributed it to 120 undergraduate students at Chiang Mai University. Cassaniti also conducted in-person interviews with 38 people in the town of Chiang Mai and the surrounding countryside of the province. As recorded in these 158 total surveys and interviews, 76 people reported personal encounters with the supernatural (58 from the surveys and 18 from the interviews) and offered descriptive, phenomenological data about these experiences that ranged from a few words to lengthy narratives.

Two narratives capture many of the qualities present throughout the whole. Nan Jon, an ex-monk, lives in a handmade shelter in a rural area of Chiang Mai province, growing his own vegetables and meditating daily. Cassaniti knew him well, having visited him many times over the years. When she first asked him about the experience of the supernatural, he was reticent to talk about it, saying, "Buddhist monks don't talk about this stuff. There's better things to do with your time." Prodded, Nan Jon related the following, which is less a direct encounter and more a description of encounters with the supernatural in general. He asked rhetorically, "You know the five Buddhist precepts?"<sup>4</sup> He went on: "Let's say someone breaks one of them. Let's say they steal, and they're sitting with you, eating, just like we are now. They're 80 percent human and 20 percent ghost [*phi*]. So you're eating with part of a ghost." This was an unexpected response; it seemed to counter the idea of the supernatural as distinct entities—entities that almost by definition are no longer naturally 'alive'. He had suggested that bad behavior made someone 'part ghost'. Nan Jon had been a monk for 30 years before he had been disrobed, rumor had it, for some kind of moral infraction. He never explained what had happened, saying that it was too

painful to think about, but he had once made a passing comment that in this context began to make sense. He had said: “Ghosts are in my heart sometimes.”

The second narrative came from Kob Pussadee, Cassaniti’s Chiang Mai colleague. After distributing and collecting the surveys, she and Cassaniti were sitting in her office, discussing the results. Kob said, “You haven’t asked me about my own experience with the supernatural. Do you want to hear it?” She then related the following story:

Last year I met a woman from Chiang Mai. She introduced herself. She’s a really good Buddhist. She invited me to go to her house, but I didn’t go. Still, she gave me something to eat. She knew everything in advance. She had a power over me. Even when I would talk to her on the phone, she knew what I was thinking, like someone is controlling your mind. Sometimes she would shout at me, “You have to do this and that!” and I would feel so bad. She would be in a weird mood at that time—she didn’t want to help me. At first I thought she was my friend, but then another time, on Skype, she said, “I have a lot of things to do.” And when I talked to her next, she was in a different mood. She shouted at me. I felt like I was not myself. In my mind I had transferred my thoughts or something. When I was living in Estonia for my master’s degree, I felt broken-hearted [*sia jai*] about things. I didn’t have *sati*, mindfulness. I was just flaky [shaking her head from side to side] all the time. At that time I had a problem with my younger brother. He wasn’t helping the family and I was worried about him, so I was more open to something controlling me. At first it was good, but then it wasn’t. She said I’m not so good. She’s not a real friend. My mom said to read a *dhamma* book and meditate, so I read it online. My Thai friends helped me; reciting the Phra Katha Chinabunchorn [a famous Thai chant] helped too. And I went to the church because there’s no temple in Estonia. I went there and prayed. I wanted to be peaceful, to do meditation and be peaceful. I listened to “Sound of the Dhamma,” dhamma sayings online that a *mae chi* [female nun] recommended. It helped me a lot.

Kob was not suggesting that this woman was some kind of supernatural being, such as a ghost. She shook her head definitively when asked and replied, “No.” Then she elaborated:

It’s about energy. Every time you go to see *moh duu* [a seer, like a palm reader], you ask, “Will I be able to get the scholarship?” and all they say is “You can.” Then you can feel calm and do the work. It’s psychology, it gives you hope. When I read your questionnaire [the one handed out to students], it sums up the experience I just described. When you miss someone, you have to rethink them. It’s *dhamma*. I sit in meditation every day, for five minutes. It helps the mind and body come together. I have had high achievements and expectations in the past. If someone did something poorly, I’d feel angry and sad, but now I’m OK with it. I’m newly born. My thinking is better. It’s like I got a vaccine ... We can’t control another person, we have to control our self. If you think “I hate him,” well, they don’t know what they did wrong. If you have mindfulness all the time, good things happen. If you don’t have mindfulness, power and energy can come and influence you. But if you have calmness and meditate, you can control your thoughts more.

Even in her elaboration Kob did not mention a supernatural being per se: there was no spirit, no non-human, non-living agent that was haunting her or interacting with her from another realm. Kob knew the research project well. She had worked on the translations, had helped to administer the surveys to students, and had read many of their replies. It was not that she did not understand the question. Yet neither Nan Jon nor Kob told stories that appeared to be about encounters with supernatural beings that had bounded autonomy and agency separate and outside of the self. Instead, their stories suggest that something about minds creates the stuff that becomes ghosts. They spoke as if the actions of the mind—usually, the mental energy of other minds intermingling with one’s own—created the supernatural.

In Thailand, people say that one of the main characteristics of Buddhism is the focus of the mind. Concentration meditation (*samadhi*) is the most common form of meditation practiced in Thailand. Awareness meditation (*vipassana*) is also a central part of Buddhist practice. Both practices teach the management of thought: it is believed that thoughts can be altered and directed and that the practitioner can choose whether to respond to or be aroused by thoughts. Through these techniques, when one is mindful (*sati*), one is in control of the self and the environment. The concentration and focus of the mind is thus both a goal and a representation of healthy minds and bodies. When one is not mindful—when, as people say, the mind is scattered around—all sorts of problems occur. Those who are mentally or physically out of sorts are said to have distracted souls (*khwan*). ‘Soul-calling ceremonies’ bring in monks and other respected elders to ‘call’ the *khwan*, which then regroup in the individual, symbolized in white string bracelets (*sai sin*) worn around the wrist. *Sai sin*, intended as protection and help in keeping one’s spirits together, are often given before someone goes on a trip or engages in other potentially dangerous or uncertain activity.

These ‘souls’ are difficult to characterize, but they could be described as a kind of personified ‘wits’, as when we say in English that someone has ‘lost their wits’. The mind, in a sense, consists of these wits, and one ought to keep them together. The Thai sometimes call this being ‘focused’. When one does not have one’s wits about oneself, when the mind is not focused, a kind of active force or ‘energy’ results. But the intended focus is not the focus of, say, a zealous competitor. The mind should instead have an evenly hovering attention. A mind centered on a single goal—a one-track mind—is likewise considered a mind that has lost focus or balance, because such a mind is attached to an idea, a wish, or a goal, and that too creates the energy associated with intentional thought and behavior. An unbalanced (scattered or overly focused) mind creates intentional energy, also known as karma, and this energy can wander from bodies and minds.<sup>5</sup> After death, the karmic energy of attachments and desires that people had in life can linger, be felt, and create effects. It can more easily be felt by people who themselves are lacking in mental focus. As a consequence, the degree of one’s own mental focus (i.e., one’s own scattered or unscattered intentions) and the intentions of others become intermingled. Encounters with the supernatural in Thailand are thus a complex play of the interactions of these intentional feelings of self and other. That said, there is a sense in which one might speak of a supernatural ‘being’. The Thai do indeed refer to entities like ghosts. They do see them and hear them, and they identify their presence when they appear. Yet what really matters about the supernatural is that it is created and experienced by the uncontrolled mind. The uncontrolled mind is permeable, and such energy crosses into it like ink seeping into water.

Three qualities dominate the accounts of the supernatural in the open-ended discussions with townspeople and in the surveys filled out by students. The first characteristic is *palang* or ‘energy’. In back-translation, *palang* can mean ‘strength’, ‘power’, and ‘energy’ all together. The terms *palang jit* (‘energy of the mind’ or ‘mental power’) and *palang neurjak thammachat* (the supernatural, literally, ‘energy outside of nature’) both revolve around this related concept of energy. The motif of energy seems to be the main idiom for conceptualizing the substance of the supernatural in Thailand. This energy is often described as a directly experienced feeling, one that is felt either on the skin or in some other sense. Here are some responses to questions about ghosts and spirits:

I’ve never met an individual spirit, but I’ve felt the energy all around.

I’ve never encountered one, exactly, but I can feel the energy sometimes. Sometimes I can sense a presence. Really, I feel the energy all the time ... Yes, it’s like touch. I can feel it on my skin.

I don't know if ghosts are real like in the movies, but for sure there's energy. There's ghost energy around us all the time, but no direction, not like human energy. It's energy, all around us.

I don't hear anything, but I know it's there. I know they want me to go to some place, the energy. I don't hear by my ear, but I know what they want.

The first time, I didn't know what it was, it was so so scary. The energy was so strong.

Yes, I have encountered a ghost. I didn't have any energy [of my own] when I saw it, I was tired. Some people are scared of ghosts but never see them. I used to be like this, but now I see it's just the spirit, the energy of the mind. We don't have to be scared.

In our Thai narratives, a full two-thirds of those who had experienced the supernatural (66 percent; 50 out of 76) felt this energy directly on their skin. Almost all of them (92 percent; 70 out of 76) said that they sensed this presence directly even in the absence of physical sensation.

Yet the energy of the supernatural is not simply pervasive, like an electric or gravitational field. Instead, it has direction and intent: it is, as we have seen, in some sense made of intention. We use the word 'intention' here in its ordinary sense to mean what one intends or wants to do. It is these wants and desires that are the qualities from which supernatural energy is made. This is the second characteristic: the energy of the supernatural is the energy of intention. In discussions, many Thai people explicitly associated intention with the supernatural. For example, one man began by talking about supernatural energy being all around. Then he continued: "It's the energy that continues life. Like when you want something. Like, 'I want to eat something.' Or, 'I want to have sex right now.' It's that energy, in us." The man's comment evoked Thai theories about karma (*kam*), a Buddhist conception of intentional action and the force that propels rebirth. He was saying that supernatural energy does not just exist after death; rather, it is part of both life and death, a karmic force based on intentional thought.

This intention, while made of energy, is often described as existing as an entity. Many of our Thai narratives related the wishes and desires of spirits that exist only because of this intentional energy. The spirit here is not a being, per se, in the bounded and embodied sense of the term. Instead, it is a manifestation of karmic desires and intentions that are, as it were, 'left over' from life. The spirit can be sensed like a person, although it does not endure like a person and does not have the internal complexity that people have. Here are some examples:

I was 15 years old. We were living about 10 kilometers from a temple. One day I was in the forest. I went to the *kuti*<sup>6</sup> and I saw a woman in white clothes. I saw this for three days. I sat in meditation. It wasn't like a ghost, it was like *jit-jai*, the mind-and-heart. She had died, she was young. But she didn't have anywhere to go. I could see her and hear her and smell her. My sister was there, too. We went out and brought vegetables and yams to the spirit.

We had just moved into a townhouse. The first night, somebody touched my body when I was sleeping! I thought I was dreaming. The next night, I couldn't move my body, but I was conscious. I saw a naked infant floating above me. It spoke in an old man's voice! I didn't tell my parents, I didn't want to scare them. Afterward, I told my grandparents, and they brought me to some monks at a Buddhist shrine. They said it was from a past life. But another monk at another shrine said it was a baby who had died right there. I don't know what it wanted, but we made merit [a religious act creating positive karma], and it went away.

Once my family and I went on vacation at the beach and rented a house. Right away I sensed some negative energy in the house. I felt it in my gut. The driver stayed at the house we were renting during the day while we were out at the ocean. At night we heard the sound of children upstairs. We thought, "OK, there's some kids playing." The next day though, coming back from the beach, I went upstairs, and the upstairs was empty. There was a bad feeling, like things were

in disarray and abandoned. At night, it was hard to breathe, and we could hear the children. Everyone could hear. We asked the driver the next day, “Did you sleep well?” and he said, “They wouldn’t let me sleep.” It was scary, but it didn’t feel like the ghost children wanted to do bad. They just wanted to let us know they were there—and wanted us to make merit.

The woman telling the story about the noises heard upstairs does not elaborate on how the children died, but it is clear that they are there and that they are felt as being there because they wanted something. In this case, according to the storyteller, they wanted only to be known and to have merit made for them. The intention of the supernatural energy is the driving force of the encounter.

It is in this context of intentionality that we can begin to make further sense of Nan Jon’s story above regarding the Buddhist precepts. Someone who breaks a precept and acts out of control (i.e., acts on impulse and does something that creates negative karma) is ‘part ghost’, and that ‘ghost energy’ is created by intention. Euro-American readers might anticipate that there is a difference between good and bad intention, between wanting something, possibly a ‘good’ thing, and doing something ‘bad’ (such as breaking a precept). This difference is present and elaborated in Buddhist thinking, but the distinction is less powerful than in the Euro-American context. The goal in Thai Buddhism is to have no karma, which comes about through having no intention. Acting with intention, whether the intention is considered good or bad, creates karmic energy. In this sense, the act of intention (i.e., wanting or desiring something) can create the kind of supernatural energy that is encountered in Thailand, aside from the actual content of the intention itself.

The third characteristic of the supernatural is its association with a lack of mental focus. These supernatural agents exist because someone wants or wanted. Wishes create a lack of calmness and centeredness, and this unfocused desire results in energy that is experienced as supernatural. Karmic, intentional supernatural energy reaches out, as it were, and is felt by beings who are themselves ‘out of focus’, who are mentally vulnerable. Supernatural energy, the unhinged forces of intention, can be quite powerful. The emotional tug of wants and desires in a human being are thought to decenter the mind, thus leaving one more open to encountering the energy of the supernatural.

This lack of focus is what Kob meant when, describing her own encounter, she shook her head back and forth to symbolize her feeble and unfocused mental state during which she became unhealthily influenced by a woman who she thought was her friend. Here are some other examples:

I met a ghost in a half-dream, after a dance performance I’d been in near the northern edge of town. In the half-dream a woman and a daughter pulled at my hands and feet. It was really sudden, and I became fully conscious right away. I was telling another performer about it in the morning, and she’d had the same experience! We told the owner of the place, and he said that the mother and daughter are ghosts who live in a tree outside behind the building.

Yes, I’ve met with a ghost. One time. My son had just died. I didn’t know myself [i.e., I didn’t know what was happening]. I went to the hospital and the doctor said it had left.

Last year my grandmother died. I didn’t know how, or what she wore when she died, but around the time she died, I saw an old woman. She was worried about me, about her kids. She wanted me to have *sati* [mindfulness]. My mind was all over the place. A man came to see me, and her mind, her spirit, was there. I didn’t see it, but I felt it. It was like *phi am*—like half-awake, half-asleep.

In each of these examples, the person reports a mental state that is somehow off balance or out of focus in some way. In the first story, the dancer reports being half-asleep but unable to move,

a state known as *phi am*, which is also the name of the ghost that comes to one in sleep. In the second case, the man finds it relevant to say that his son had recently died, suggesting a state of mental unbalance. And in the last, in addition to *phi am*, the man reporting the encounter explicitly mentions *sati*, the Buddhist idea of mindfulness. He says that the spirit of his grandmother wanted him to be mindful, for his mind was “all over the place.” In each of these narratives, it is almost as if one’s mind (or minds, if we think of the ‘wits’ of *khwan*) becomes dislodged. It is in part because the mind loses focus that the energy of the supernatural makes itself felt.

Sometimes the supernatural encounter that results from this lack of focus is felt outside one’s body and mind, and sometimes it is felt on the inside. In the latter case, the supernatural experience becomes more like what we might call ‘possession.’ Among the Chiang Mai Thai, the lines, or boundary, between one’s own mind and another’s, or between the inside and outside of a person, are not clearly drawn. In Kob’s case, while the woman did not ‘possess’ her, per se, Kob felt the experience as someone controlling her; she felt the energy of the other woman in her mind. In other cases, similarly, the ‘feltness’ of the supernatural is not necessarily reported on the skin, as touching a person at the boundary, but is felt mentally—on the inside as well as the outside.

This ability of another’s energy to enter into the mind in times when one’s own mind is scattered and not calm can, in extreme cases, cause one to lose consciousness altogether. People report fainting or forgetting what they were doing,<sup>7</sup> and the result does look very much like possession. In these instances, the supernatural energy is said to take over the body and mind for a period of time. These happenings almost always occur when a person is unfocused mentally, for example, in the unfocused period between wakefulness and sleep, or when some difficult issue preoccupies a person (causing the mind to be cloudy and unfocused), or when a person is sick (with similar results). There are also professional spirit mediums who deliberately use elaborate practices to create a state of mental unfocus that allows energy from elsewhere to enter a person. Here are some examples:

I was nine years old and had gotten dengue fever. I was in the hospital when I met with a ghost. My eyes got really really wide, and I opened my mouth so wide the edges of my mouth started bleeding. I bit my tongue so hard they had to come and put a wooden bite in my mouth to keep me from cutting off my tongue. [She demonstrates the eyes and the bloody edges of her mouth wide open and bites down.] I talked in an old man’s voice. I said I killed myself. My brother was there, he was 17 at the time, and he and others told me what happened. We figured out what had happened. There was a well I’d been to a while before the incident, seven wells, and when I was pulling up water from one of them, I’d stuck my tongue out and bit it, and that’s when the ghost hit me [she jerks back, like getting physically hit]. It turns out he’d been an old man living there who had killed himself. He wandered around the wells, circling them, and I was just standing there, sick, when he ran into me. Then later, in me, at the hospital, he talked.

A few years ago I went to the rice field by my house, and there was an eerie feel in the air: it was like *phi am*, but in the daytime. We’d gone to the rice field, my mom and I, and on the way back she was startled by something. Then she screamed out and went crazy. I ran away [he laughs shamefully at having run away]. I went to my uncle, who used to be a monk for 20 years, and he came back and we shook her. She closed her eyes, and she spoke in some language like Khymer. I had studied Khymer, but she hadn’t, that’s how I knew it was Khymer and why I was surprised she was speaking it. She was crying and sweating for about half an hour. After that we figured out, because we asked the owner of the rice field, that a Khymer couple had died at the rice field. We made offerings and built them a spirit house. They were hungry—when my mom had regained consciousness, she says she remembers being hungry.



In the first case, the woman had dengue fever and was thus not in full charge of her mental capabilities. In the second, the mother of the narrator was surprised by something unusual, and because of that, the spirit could enter her.

These three characteristics—energy, intention, and mental focus—have been found to be associated with the supernatural in other ethnographic accounts of Thailand as well. Nancy Eberhardt's (2006) *Imagining the Course of Life*, an ethnography of a northern Thai Shan community, describes the case of a young woman named Nang Yen who was killed during a hurricane. After the tragedy, Nang Yen's family and friends feared their own thoughts and attachments to her and tried to minimize these feelings; for example, no one said that they felt 'sad' about the death. Emotional states such as sadness, Eberhardt tells us, "are considered dangerous because they make one's *khwan* vulnerable to being scared off or, even worse, called to join the deceased" (ibid.: 63). At one point following the death, Eberhardt reports that her young assistant, Nang Kaew, was unwilling to go to the temple at night, stating, "When you're scared [i.e., in a state of mental unfocus], you shouldn't go. Your *khwan* might leave" (ibid.: 61).<sup>8</sup>

There is another example in Engel and Engel's (2010) *Tort, Custom, and Karma*, a legal analysis of injury cases and their explanations in Thailand. The authors tell the story of Inta, a man who passed a fatal accident on his way to work one day and later hurt his arm at the factory where he worked (ibid.: 2):

Inta continued on his way to the factory that day, and for the next five months he drove past the accident site as he traveled to and from work. Each time, he could not help thinking about the dead man he had seen there. Later, a spirit medium revealed to Inta's mother that this man's ghost had caused Inta's injury. By allowing the dead person to enter his thoughts, Inta had made himself vulnerable to the ghost's influence, and its chance finally came while Inta was working at the factory. One day Inta felt the ghost push on his shoulder to extend his arm, and he felt it pull the fingers of his hand into the stamping machine ... As soon as he made an offering to the ghost, the swelling in his arm disappeared.

Because Inta had thought about the man, allowing the dead person to enter his thoughts, he had become vulnerable to the influence of the dead man's supernatural energy.

Once intentions are enacted, that is, once a person makes merit for the spirit or allows it to be encountered or somehow appeases its desires in another way, the spirit is no longer felt as present. 'Making merit' consists in specific actions—contributing money to a monastery or giving food to monks—that are understood to generate good for the person who does the acts. This practice is a very common way to relieve the negative, lingering energy of the supernatural in Thailand. Among our subjects, the most common response to the perception of the supernatural is to make merit at a Buddhist temple. Making merit is seen as a way to calm the mind (Cassaniti 2009), helping the person to regain a sense of mental calm and focus. In doing so, it helps the supernatural energy likewise to become calm and, ultimately, to dissipate.

In more extreme cases, monks and other religious experts are called in to perform ceremonies. These rituals can be as benign as chanting some Pali words quietly while a focusing *sai sin* bracelet is given to the afflicted person, or they can be as dramatic as holding large ceremonies where the white strings that call back the *khwan* are draped around the temple and groups of monks chant in unison to compel the supernatural energy to leave the mind of the person encountering it. It is these latter activities that usually make up the final scenes in the enormously popular Thai ghost movies. The first and less dramatic examples are most often found in real life. One woman reported such a low-key example: "One time when I was young, in Isaan, I was at a temple and a woman came in. She had a spirit in her, and she was screaming and shaking. Her family had brought her in and asked the monks to get rid of the spirit. They went like this

[she strikes out into the air at an imaginary person and spits at the same time], and it was gone.” The family had appealed to the monks in part because they are the virtuosi of mental focus in Thai culture. In this case, the striking and spitting was carried out to dislocate, symbolically and physically, the supernatural energy from the woman who had come into contact with it.

Cassaniti had seen a similar performance conducted by a spirit doctor a few years earlier. The spirit doctor had spent many years as a monk, as most spirit doctors have, and now performed services to help people with mental and physical health problems. At that time, a man who was, according to his father, in the throes of alcoholism sat on the floor as the spirit doctor circled him, hitting the man with leaves and water. When asked what he was doing, the spirit doctor replied that he was working to “detach the ‘spirits’ [of alcohol]” from the man’s body. In this case, as in others, supernatural energy is thought to enter into one’s body and mind; driving it out involves a process of returning the mind to focus. A scattered mind, a mind that does not have focus because of wants and desires and attachments, is more vulnerable to encounters with the supernatural. A collected, evenly focused mind is less vulnerable.

## The United States

In the United States, the supernatural and the mind that it reflects look strikingly different. Rather than being generated by persons both living and deceased, supernatural entities that are human in origin are almost always associated with persons who are dead. Rather than existing as the energy of intention—an energy that is associated with but separate from individual people—in the US the supernatural is most often felt to come from supernatural beings that are autonomous and individual agents. And instead of having the capacity to permeate bodies and minds, the supernatural is most often experienced as outside of the person encountering it; it is seen and heard and sometimes felt but usually not internalized. Among experientially oriented evangelicals, God does speak in the mind, but ‘He’ does so as an external and distinct person-like being, and those who experience God that way have to be taught to overcome their hesitation to experience another’s words within their minds (Luhrmann 2012). Again, these differences appear to result from differences in the understanding of mind, in the way that perception, imagination, thought, and feeling are understood and experienced.

We collected these narratives as part of a class project in a freshman seminar taught by Luhrmann shortly before Cassaniti left for Thailand in the winter of 2011. The 10 students in the class were asked to find 10 fellow students who had experienced something ‘supernatural’. They interviewed these students, asking them the questions on our survey, and wrote down their responses.

There are quantifiable differences between the responses of the Chiang Mai residents and the American undergraduates (see table 1). We asked people whether they tasted, smelled, heard, saw, or felt the supernatural. People could check (or identify) more than one sense, and they often did. The Thai were far more likely than the Americans to say that they felt the supernatural and that they were aware of it in ways other than their physical senses.

Rather than being felt inside the mind, most encounters with the supernatural in the US are reported as being experienced outside of the mind, knowable through sensory experience. Following are some examples:

I was studying in my room when I saw this weird shadow on my wall. I mean, I couldn’t see any arms or legs but still it looked like a human silhouette. I thought someone was standing outside of my window, but it wasn’t even sunny. And even if they were, the shadow shouldn’t

**Table 1:** Sense survey results: United States as compared to Thailand

	United States (n=94)	Thailand (n=76)
Tasted	0	1%
Smelled	<1%	18%
Heard	39%	38%
Saw	44%	49%
Felt (in the mind or on the skin)	37%	66%
Sensed other than above	67%	92%

have appeared where it was. At first I ignored it, but then it walked back and forth twice. Before I could run out of my room, it disappeared. I was scared for my life.

It was a couple years ago. I was getting ready to go to school. I was walking toward the kitchen when I turned the hallway corner and saw this giant man standing by the door. I was about to shout or ask who he was when, all of a sudden, he disappeared. I was really shaken and woke my parents up. I still felt that he was in the house and near us. The utter silence was creepy.

I saw this girl who used to go to my school but died in a car accident in the hallway. We had a class in the same building, and I would usually see her come out of her class at the same time. When I saw her this time, it felt so real and she looked right at me. I felt sick and scared the entire day.

I was about seven, and it was the night before Easter. It was the middle of the night. I heard someone moving around. I opened my eyes a tiny bit, and I saw the Easter Bunny. He was pink, fuzzy, and had a really deep voice. He left my candy on the table, and then he quietly hopped away.

When I was around seven, I woke up in the middle of the night and saw a lady in a long navy blue dress walking out of my room. Her hair was in a low bun; she was tall. She walked away really smoothly, almost like a glide, and I knew it wasn't my mom.

It was 3:00 or 4:00 AM in the desert. A really bright light out in the air. Not a helicopter or airplane. Curved around. Didn't hear any helicopter noise. It stayed in the air. Other lights came up.

At my grandmother's house the night before her funeral, I saw a young woman sitting at a make-up station, brushing her long, blond hair.

While people in both Thailand and the US saw and heard at about the same rate, sight and sound took a lesser role in Thai encounters compared with tactile awareness. In the US, by contrast, both sight and sound were the dominant means through which the supernatural was identified. Only one encounter in the US incorporated smell, while almost 20 percent of the Thai narratives did so. These differences point to a fertile area for the phenomenological investigation of minds. Sensory experiences tell us about 'modes of attention,'<sup>9</sup> pointing to the ways that we encounter the world phenomenologically. The things that we see, hear, smell, taste, touch, and perceive in general have to do not only with what is 'out there' in some objective sense, but also with what we are trained culturally to see, hear, smell, taste, and touch. As Desjarlais (2003: 342) remarks, "How images are perceived, smells transacted, words uttered, or touch engaged ties into how certain truths are established. What people come to sense in their lives and how they are perceived, observed, and talked about by others contribute to the makings of selfhood and subjectivity."

We know that different senses are emphasized in different cultures. Euro-American culture tends to pay little attention to, or even debases, the sense of smell (Classen 1993);<sup>10</sup> instead, the

sense of sight is culturally dominant, or at least it is argued to be so (see Ong 1982). By contrast, among the Ommura of Papua New Guinea, smell is said to be the most important sense (Mayer 1982), and for the Suya of Brazil it is hearing (Seeger 1981). In one of the earliest texts on the anthropology of the senses, Classen (1990) claims that culturally dominant modes of perception differ between upland and lowland South America: in the Amazon, people most value smell and taste, while in the upland Andes they privilege sight and sound. The very idea of the five senses is culturally variable. Buddhism identifies the mind as a sixth sense, and Classen (1993) suggests that in pre-modern Europe speech was considered a sixth sense. The Anlo-Ewe of Ghana give great cultural attention to *seselelame*, the kinesthetic sense of balance (Geurts 2002). They treat *seselelame* as a kind of ‘embodied knowing’ that blends sensation and perception. The Hausa of Nigeria are said to have only two senses, *gani* (sight) and *ji* (a category that encompasses hearing, tasting, smelling, touching, intuiting, and knowing) (Ritchie 1991). The Chipewyan in the subarctic region seem to imagine a more ‘holistic relationship’ of the senses based on intuitions and feelings rather than on a single sense or a combination of discrete senses (Smith 1998). The anthropological evidence about the sensory mode of supernatural encounters is slight (but see Luhrmann 2011). Chinese people living in San Francisco seem more likely to hear the supernatural than Chinese people living in Taiwan, who are more likely to see the presence (Eberhard 1971). Beattie ([1964] 2004: 128) writes that “[u]nlike its European counterpart, a Nyoro (Uganda) ghost is never seen.” Instead, the odor of a ghost’s breath gives its presence away, and it is the worst smell imaginable. Among the Orang Sakai in Sumatra, sound is an intersensorial stimulus that becomes focal for shamanic epistemology (Porath 2008).

But the sensorial is not the only difference between the Thai and US samples in our investigation. In the US, the senses of sight and sound are used to discern autonomous, external supernatural beings. Here are some examples:

When I was in church, I saw a demon in the prayer room.

I saw an angel running down Escondido road.

I was praying for my mom last year because the doctors said she might have cancer. I saw a vision of God, and he told me she would be ok. It turns out she did not have cancer after all.

I was sitting in my backyard, just reading a magazine, when I heard my grandfather in the kitchen. Then I heard him call out my name. I said, “Coming.” But when I went in, he wasn’t there. I asked my mom if grandpa came, but she said no. He died about three days later.

It was very recent. My parents just got divorced and my family was going through major financial hurdles. I didn’t think I would be able to go back to school this year. I was really depressed so I went to our church and just sat there for a long time without saying anything. Then I heard, very explicitly, but in a soothing voice, “Just go.” I knew what it meant.

Lying in bed one night, I thought I heard a chorus of voices speaking in my head. They were saying really depressing things like there were people in the room. It was negative but then it turned positive—it felt like evil spirits getting me depressed, but I started praying and they disappeared almost instantly.

I was fast asleep, and in the midst of my sleep I was disturbed. I kept hearing music. At first it was nice, quiet, but then it got louder and louder until I was fully awake and awake. Although no longer in a dream, I still heard the lingering traces of that song moving through the air. It was a song I’ve heard before, Horne’s “Stormy Weather.” Somehow I couldn’t get back to sleep so I got up because I had work to do anyway. My laptop home page ‘newssection’ flickered, and said “Lena Horne just passed away moments ago. She will be greatly missed.”

After my grandmother's funeral, I went back to her house and heard a 'ding-ding' and first my dad, then my mom heard it. It sounded like a bell my grandmother would ring for dinner.

Something (maybe an angel?) called out my name and told me where to go for the Super-Shuttle at the airport. An old man in a white coat with gray hair.

These accounts involve beings that are people-like, and the beings are decidedly entities, not energies. They sometimes interact, and while they are moral—often clearly either morally good or bad—they themselves are not morals. They are like persons. Sometimes they are like the memory trace of a person who has died, but it is the person that they represent, or a sound or a sight with no material cause.

The most profound causal difference between these two samples is that Thai minds are thought to be permeable, with the precarious potential to scatter, while in the US minds are thought to be bounded. In the US, things supernatural are discerned through people's senses and found outside the mind, unless they are evangelicals or of a certain persuasion. Almost everyone in Thailand either has been possessed by a spirit at one time or another or knows of someone who has been. In contrast, possession in the US is rare: instead of occurring within the mind and body, almost all encounters with the supernatural occur externally. When possession does happen in the US, it is most often described in Christian terms. The individual is possessed by the devil (in negative cases) or by God (in positive cases) or by oneself, as in a dissociative identity disorder (although none of our subjects reported this). Only 4 of our 94 American subjects (few of whom seemed to be evangelical) described experiences that touched on possession:

The people were possessed. I was told that the devil was trying to interrupt them.

When I was in Ethiopia last summer, I saw a girl possessed by a demon. She was being held down by two men but had the strength to throw them off her.

I was praying over the weekend, and I asked God to heal my knee (I was on crutches). I felt God's presence come over me; it felt like a waterfall, it was hard to describe. It was all over me.

I felt the spirit of God come over me like electricity. It went from head to toe and out to my fingertips. I was trembling, and it felt like I was being purified. It lasted about five to ten minutes.

Charles Taylor (2007) has famously described the Western mind—at least, the Euro-American mind—as 'buffered' (he actually refers to the 'self' but is describing the mind). There is an assumption, he says, that outside entities do not enter the mind. Non-Western worlds are more likely to have a 'porous' mind, a mind into which the supernatural can cross at will. The buffered mind is in fact bounded, a container full of private thoughts and feelings that are known to none but the thinker. Although his distinction is controversial, this contrast has been noted by many anthropologists. Michelle Rosaldo (1980) described the *rinawa*, the mind-heart that can leave the body during sleep for the Ilongot in the Philippines. Takie Lebra (1993: 65) has written that in Japan the *mi* is the "spirit and body, mentation and sensation, the conscious and unconscious ... not a fixed entity but a 'relational unity' which emerges out of involvement with other (persons or things)" (see also Lillard 1998).

In Thailand, the mind is not impenetrable; its energy can wander, disperse, get lost, and return again. It is always under the potential influence of others. In the US, the mind is a proud and private fortress. Anthropologists have described this imagined quality largely through the way that the self is understood. Geertz (1983: 59) characterized the particular quality of the Western self as a "bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic

center of awareness, emotion, judgment, and action organized into a distinctive whole and set contrastively both against other such wholes and against its social and natural background.” This Western self, Dorinne Kondo (1990: 11) explains, “calls up its opposing term, ‘society,’ and presupposes a particular topography: a self, enclosed in a bodily shell, composed of an inner essence associated with truth and ‘real’ feelings and identity, standing in opposition to a world that is spatially and ontologically distinct from the self.” It is, Mauss (1985) asserted, a conceptualization particular to a Western context.

Later anthropologists (Marriott 1976; Strathern 1988; Wagner 1991) and psychologists (Markus and Kitayama 1991) have stressed the relational dimension of selves in many non-Western contexts—South Asian, Melanesian, Japanese. They have shown that the individual self is not understood to be separate and set apart, but integrated, dependent upon, and involved with others—even composed in part through interaction with them. Yet this sense of interrelatedness is not necessarily true of the way that minds are imagined in those settings. Indeed, in Melanesia and elsewhere in the region, minds are treated as rigidly private. Intentions are not publically inferred; they belong to those that think them. So clear is this cultural assertion that anthropologists have come to speak of the “opacity of other minds” (Robbins and Rumsey 2008: 407).

In the US, what is true of selves is also true of minds. The individual and his or her mind are bounded like a walled-in garden, and everyone knows that there is a sharp distinction between what is in the inside and what is without.

## Conclusion

Just as there are social norms that manage reproduction and inheritance, there are social norms about what people perceive, feel, and hold in the mind. These are social norms, not biological mechanisms, and they can be honored in the breach. Americans sometimes become possessed. Thai sometimes have a clear sense of a supernatural entity, bounded and set apart. But in general, the two groups in our survey had different expectations about the mind and different rules about the appropriate way to experience the mind. In consequence, the two had different norms for perceiving something that was not materially perceptible. The Thai expect the boundaries between mind and world to be permeable, and they rigorously train their minds to be calm and controllable. They believe that an unruly mind will let a supernatural energy slip in and that they will be more susceptible to it in turn. They chastise themselves for their supernatural experiences. Americans expect the boundaries between mind and world to be clear and sturdy. They do not feel the need to train the mind to be controlled. Thus, they are startled when the supernatural appears to them, but they do not feel guilty.

The term ‘theory of mind’ has a well-established meaning in the developmental literature. It refers to a young child’s developing awareness that people have minds and that what they know—what they hold in their minds—will affect what they do. Developmental psychologists sometimes treat this as a universal process, one that employs an identical model of mind. Some, however, are beginning to recognize that there are culturally variable aspects to the ideas and expectations about the mind that young children come to recognize (see, e.g., Lillard 1998).

We suggest that a phenomenological approach can help to sketch out an anthropological theory of mind—a map of the way that the understanding of mind shifts from one social setting to another. By paying attention to the way that social groups experience experience, we can identify the implicit rules that people use in feeling, perceiving, and responding to the world around them. Such an approach could orient a phenomenological anthropology in a comparative mode and thus help us to classify and explain the differences that we observe between different social worlds.

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## ■ NOTES

1. See <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/phenomenology>.
2. At least, this is how the first approach to the study of phenomenology is often viewed. To be fair, many of these researchers are too sophisticated to be reductionist, James above all.
3. For background reading on the supernatural landscape in Thailand, see Rajadhon (1961), Tambiah (1970), and Textor (1973).
4. The five Buddhist precepts are injunctions against lying, stealing, killing, sexual misconduct, and intoxication.
5. In the system of karma thought to be at work in Thailand, it is the intention that creates karma (Keyes and Daniel 1983) and not the action itself, as in Hinduism or Jainism (Krishan 1997; O'Flaherty 1980).
6. A *kuti* is the living quarters for monks and other meditators in temples in Thailand. It is usually a small hut on stilts and is situated in a remote location in the woods, away from others.
7. The Thai colloquial expression for losing consciousness is to say that one *my ruu tua*—that is, one 'does not know the body'.
8. In interviewing Buddhist monks, Buddhist laypeople, and Christians in Chiang Mai, it became clear that significantly fewer monks reported instances of being scared or shocked than did laypeople, who in turn were less likely to report such instances than their Christian neighbors (Cassaniti 2009).
9. We are using this phrase in the sense of Csordas's (1993) 'somatic modes of attention'.
10. An alternative explanation involves ecology. Classen (1990) suggests that the reason people in her Amazonian sample evoked smell more than did those in her Andean sample was partly because of the environment. In the hot, damp forest climate of the low-land, smell is more prevalent and important than in the spacious, cold, and oxygen-poor mountains of the Andes. While the ecological climate of the US and Europe varies greatly, the tropical environment of Thailand is almost always hotter. Smell could be more relevant in Thailand than in the US because of similar ecological differences.

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