

**Miracles and Superhuman Powers in South Asian Buddhist Literature**

by

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The Eight Miracles of the Buddha  
(Sarnath, late 5<sup>th</sup> century C.E.)

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mātāpītroḥ hitārogyaprītisukhārthāya sarvasattvānāṃ ca

For the welfare, health, joy and happiness of my parents and all beings

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miracles, magic and “the supernatural.”

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## List of Abbreviations

- A = *Aṅguttaranikāya* (Morris and Hardy, eds. 1885-1900)  
AA = *Aṅguttaranikāyaṭṭhakathā* (CSCD)  
AKbh = *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* with *Sphūṭārthavyākhyā* (Śāstrī, ed. 1998)  
AKI = *Avadānakalpalatā* (Das and Vidyābhūṣaṇa, eds. 1888)  
AŚ = *Avadānaśataka* (Speyer, ed. 1906-1909)  
Bbh = *Bodhisattvabhūmi* (Dutt, ed. 1978)  
BA = *Bodhicaryāvatāra* (Vaidya, ed. 1960)  
BHSD = *Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit Dictionary* (Edgerton, 1953)  
CPD = *A Dictionary of the Pali Language* (Childers, 1909)  
Cps = *Catuspariṣatsūtra* (Waldschmidt, ed. 1962)  
CSCD = *Chaṭṭha Saṅgāyana CD-ROM*  
D = *Dīghanikāya* (Rhys Davids and Carpenter, eds. 1890-1911)  
DA = *Dīghanikāyaṭṭhakathā* (Rhys Davids, Carpenter and Stede, eds. 1968-1971)  
DAṭ = *Dīghanikāyaṭṭhakathāṭīkā* (De Silva, ed. 1970)  
DhA = *Dhammapadaṭṭhakathā* (Smith and Norman, eds. 1906-1915)  
Div = *Divyāvadāna* (Cowell and Neil, eds. 1866)  
Gv = *Gaṇḍavyūhasūtra* (Vaidya, ed. 1960)  
J = *Jātaka* (Fausbøll, ed. 1877)  
K = Khotanese language  
Kośa = *L'Abhidharmakośa de Vasubandhu* (La Vallée Poussin, trans. 1923-1931)  
M = *Majjhimanikāya* (Trenckner, ed. 1888-1925)  
MA = *Majjhimanikāyaṭṭhakathā* (Horner, ed. 1977)  
Mil = *Milindapañha* (Trenckner, ed. 1880)  
MMK = *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (De Jong, ed. 1977)  
MSA = *Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkāra* (Lévi, ed. 1907)  
Mv = *Mahāvastu* (Senart, ed. 1882-1897)  
MW = *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary* (Monier Williams, ed. 1899)  
P = Pāli language  
PED = *The Pali Text Society's Pali English Dictionary* (Rhys Davids and Stede, eds. 1921-1925)  
Ppp = *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* (Dutt, ed. 1934)  
Psm = *Paṭisambhidāmagga* (CSCD)  
PSED = *Practical Sanskrit-English Dictionary* (Apte, 1957)  
PTS = Pali Text Society  
PvA = *Petavatthu-aṭṭhakathā* (CSCD)  
S = *Samyuttanikāya* (Feer, ed. 1884-1898)  
Śbh = *Śrāvakaḥṭīkā* (Deleanu, ed. 2006)  
Sdp = *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* (Vaidya, ed. 1960)

Siddhi = *Vijñaptimātratāsiddhi. La Siddhi de Hiuan-tsang.* (La Vallée Poussin, trans. 1929)

Skt = Sanskrit language

T = *Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō* (Takakusu and Watanabe, eds. 1924-1932)

ThgA = *Theragāthā-aṭṭhakathā* (CSCD)

Tib = Tibetan language

Traité = *Le Traité de la Grande Vertu de la Sagesse* (Lamotte, trans. 1944-1980)

V = *Vinaya Piṭaka* (Oldenberg, ed. 1879-1883)

VA = *Vinayaṭṭhakathā* (CSCD)

Vkn = *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* (Study Group on Buddhist Sanskrit Literature, ed. 2006)

Vsm = *Visuddhimagga* (Warren and Kosambi, eds. 1950)

VvA = *Vimānavatthu-aṭṭhakathā* (CSCD)

## **Chapter I**

### **Introduction**

#### Senses of Miracle

“To discourse of miracles without defining what one means by the word miracle, is to make a shew [sic], but in effect to talk of nothing.” With this comment, the English philosopher John Locke begins “A Discourse of Miracles,”<sup>1</sup> a short essay he wrote in criticism of Reverend William Fleetwood’s “An Essay upon Miracles in Two Discourses,” published in London in 1701.<sup>2</sup> Although the context is quite different, Locke’s sentiment is appropriate for the beginning of the present study of miracles and superhuman powers in the Buddhist literature of South Asia. This dissertation is concerned primarily with Buddhist conceptions of the miraculous, magical, marvelous and fantastic, paying special attention to how Buddhists define their own terms. To speak of Buddhist miracles without defining what they meant by a miracle, and indicating why it is appropriate to use the word in translating Buddhist terminology, makes a good show, but falls short of the goal of analytical clarity.

While scholars have long been aware of the presence of marvelous events in Buddhist literature, and while it may now be more fashionable to speak of them, some may still hesitate to use the word miracle in the context of Buddhism. This hesitancy is

nothing new. Alfred Foucher did as much as anyone to draw attention to miracles in Buddhist art and literature. However, he claims in his *La Vie du Bouddha* that the term miracle “in its full sense” could not be applied to Buddhism without “an abuse of language.”<sup>3</sup>

While affirming that the Buddha is commonly depicted in Buddhist art and literature as deploying his “magical powers” on various occasions, Foucher offers several reasons why miracle is not an appropriate term to use. First, he points out that numerous disciples of the Buddha and many of his rivals were also thought to possess magical powers. Moreover, he argues, “In Indian ideas, supernatural powers do not exceed the limits of nature.” Finally, he claims that “primitive Buddhism” did not require its followers to believe in miracles. Foucher concludes that one may use the term miracle in reference to Buddhism only in the sense of an extraordinary event.

There are various ways of interpreting these arguments, and similar ones have been made by other scholars, as well.<sup>4</sup> Without going into a detailed analysis of them here, several points can be recognized initially. One is Foucher’s readiness to speak of magic and magical powers in the context of Buddhism and other Indian religions despite his reluctance to speak of miracles. Another is the way Foucher seems to suggest not only that “primitive Buddhism” did not require its followers to believe in miracles, but also that Buddhists did not conceptualize the miracle, which he claims is equivalent to the supernatural. It is one thing to say that Buddhism did not require its followers to believe in miracles, but quite another to say that they did not possess a concept of the miracle.

What is lacking in contemporary scholarship is a detailed assessment of how Buddhists themselves defined or conceptualized their own array of terms for miracles,

magic, superhuman powers and so forth. This dissertation sets out to fill this void, arguing that miracle is an appropriate term to use in translating specific Buddhist terminology. I justify this translation choice with reference to how terms have been defined both in Western discourse and in Buddhist discourse. Translation choices are often highly subjective, but reasons can be given for why particular terms are chosen. Terms can be defined analytically, that is, by stipulating a particular definition, and they can also be defined in opposition to other terms. Analytically speaking, miracle is an appropriate term to use in translating certain Buddhist technical terminology, because Buddhist definitions of its own terms for miracle match, in some significant ways, how the term has been often defined in Western discourse. Also, Buddhist discourse distinguishes between miracles and magic in a way that is similar to how these terms are sometimes opposed in Western discourse.

In Western discourse, a miracle has often been defined as a supernatural intercession violating the laws of nature. This is the sense emphasized by David Hume.<sup>5</sup> It is also one of the crucial elements in Foucher's understanding of the concept. However, the miracle is a complicated concept in the context of Western discourse, and one ought not to reduce this complexity to a single, fixed standard against which to measure Buddhist discourse. Exclusive focus on the concepts of natural law and supernaturalism has obscured other elements common in definitions of the miracle. For instance, miracles serve as proof of God's majesty and beneficence, his greatness and power, and are a testament to the holiness and sacred purpose of the miracle-worker. Given the evidentiary purpose of miracles, they are also necessarily acts that have a witness or witnesses. These elements are present in David Hume's discussion, but feature prominently in John

Locke's definition of the miracle, in William Fleetwood's, as well as in those of other Western theologians and philosophers of religion.

Now, it is questionable whether Buddhist discourse ever developed a concept equivalent to what we might call natural law. The so-called law of karma is one often cited candidate, but there are others that need to be mentioned, like "dependent origination" (*pratītyasamutpāda*) and "the nature of things" (*dharmatā*). Are these concepts really equivalent to the modern notion of natural law, Newton's laws of motion and gravity, for instance, which informs the writings of philosophers of religion like John Locke, David Hume, and more recently, Richard Swinburne? The answer is not particularly straightforward. However, it seems more or less clear that these notions are not clearly opposed in Buddhist discourse to some kind of divine or supernatural power or entity. Thus, miraculous demonstrations of superhuman powers are not defined in Buddhist discourse as violations of laws of cause and effect, but rather seem to involve an extension of certain principles of meditation, that is, of mind over matter.

Buddhism did develop a clear distinction between what one might approximately translate as the mundane and the transmundane or transcendent. These terms have a uniquely Buddhist character. The miracle may sometimes be defined in terms of what is "supernatural" or "transcendent," but the Buddhist term that I am roughly translating here, *lokuttara* in Pāli or *lokottara* in Sanskrit, involves the Buddha's transcendence of the mundane worlds of death and rebirth, a quality that gives him the ability to lead others to the same goal. While the Buddha's transcendence of the realm of rebirth may make him a "supernatural being" in Buddhist terms, it remains questionable whether this sense of the supernatural is equivalent to the notion of the supernatural in a Western religious context.



In any case, the nature and meaning of the Buddha's simultaneous immanence and transcendence is a significant topic of discussion for Buddhist philosophers.

Despite his remarks about the applicability of the concept of the miracle in a Buddhist context, Foucher raises one of the central questions of this dissertation: If Buddhists accepted that the Buddha's disciples, and even some of his rivals, possessed superhuman powers similar or equal to those of the Buddha, then what, if anything, distinguishes the Buddha and makes him superior to them? In Buddhist discourse, miracles are conceived as public displays of superhuman knowledge and power that impress, shock, and generate faith in those who witness or hear accounts of them. They exhort people to higher levels of spiritual attainment. Perhaps more importantly, however, they are also conceived as significant events that demonstrate the greatness of the Buddha, and, by extension, his teachings, institutions, and eminent disciples. In Buddhist discourse, miracles are more than mere marvels. To borrow the words of a contemporary Western philosopher of religion, Richard Swinburne, one can say that miracles in Buddhism carry "religious significance," that is, they "contribute significantly towards a holy divine purpose for the world."<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, Swinburne also then goes on to contrast miracles with magical phenomena. He says, "Extraordinary events lacking religious significance are more appropriately characterized as magical or psychic phenomena rather than as miracles."<sup>7</sup>

Magic and miracle are admittedly vague and loosely defined terms in modern everyday usage. There is nothing wrong with this, but this looseness has contributed to their being used indiscriminately to describe and translate terms for a range of similar phenomena in various cross-cultural and comparative contexts. However, these terms

also have a long history in Western discourse, which has given them strong and persistent connotations. In modern Western discourse, the meanings of the terms magic and miracle, as well as religion, have been strongly influenced by both the rise of modern science and the Protestant Reformation. By the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, magic became synonymous with superstition, false science, and ineffectual ritual, and was separated from the category of religion.<sup>8</sup> Miracles, and belief in them, also became objects of criticism for those who wished to see religion as consistent with the new spirit of rationality and empiricism.

Though in modern times they have been grouped together to some extent in opposition to rationality, and though they bear some similarities, the terms miracle and magic were traditionally set in opposition to each other, as they are, for instance, in Rev. Fleetwood's essay on miracles, when he discusses the wonderworking contest between Moses and the Egyptian magicians. Magic carried negative connotations and was a term applied to "others" (often, though not exclusively to non-Christians), while miracle tended to be positive and self-referential (most often referring to a Christian context).

Magic also became a common analytical term in anthropological writings of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>9</sup> For this reason, perhaps, it has been used in cross-cultural hermeneutics more often than miracle.<sup>10</sup> Thus, it has also been more common to speak of magic than miracle when discussing displays of superhuman powers in Buddhism. Reflecting the state of the field in history of religions at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* includes a long multi-author entry on magic, with an article on Buddhist magic written by one of the great luminaries of the field, Louis de la Vallée Poussin.<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, however, although there are many

subcategories of magic in *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, there is no section on Christian magic. Instead the reader looking for such a discussion is referred to the entry on “Charms and Amulets (Christian).”

In contrast to the entry on magic, the entry on miracles in *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* is by a single author, J.A. MacCullough. Unsurprisingly, he focuses primarily (but not exclusively) on the Christian miracles. The stance taken in MacCullough’s article is clearly that Jesus Christ is the chief miracle worker and most likely candidate to have performed miracles, if anyone did. The founders of the so-called “ethnic religions,” according to MacCullough, “did not claim to perform miracles.” He contrasts “miracles” with “wonders.” Miracle he defines rather technically as “an occasional evidence of direct divine power in an action striking and unusual, yet by its beneficence pointing to the goodness of God.”<sup>12</sup> He continues, “Mere wonders, by whomsoever wrought, would have a thaumaturgic aspect and would not reveal character—e.g., spiritualistic marvels.” As the article continues, it becomes clear that the author thinks of “mere wonders” or “spiritualistic marvels” as magic, which he distinguishes from miracles. Magic or “mere wonders” do not point to the goodness of God, and therefore cannot be considered miraculous.

Interestingly, when MacCullough discusses the “ethnic religions”—including Confucianism, Hinduism and (surprisingly) Buddhism (which was often conceived in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, alongside Christianity, as a universal religion that transcends ethnic boundaries)—the consistency of his terminology begins to break down. Miracle, magic and wonder are used more or less interchangeably. However, the general impression given by the article is that, in non-Christian contexts, miracles, if one can

even call them that, do not constitute signs of the Christian God, and therefore are not technically miracles. One may contrast this stance with the position taken by Rev. Fleetwood, for instance, who argues that the “miracles” of the Egyptian magicians must have been real and thus can only have been caused by God, but for his own divine purposes.<sup>13</sup> In either case, however, the argument is that miracles truly deserving of the name must somehow point to the greatness of the Christian God.

If providing evidence of the greatness of the Christian God is proffered as the key element of the definition of miracle, then it might be hard to see how the term can be used appropriately in a cross-cultural context. As W. Norman Brown aptly pointed out in his comparative study of Indian and Christian miracles of walking on the water, Buddhist miracles must be situated most immediately in their broader South Asian context.<sup>14</sup> This broader South Asian discourse developed largely, if not completely, in isolation from the Judeo-Christian context.

The conceptual background of South Asian Buddhist discourse on miracles and superhuman powers (and South Asian Buddhist discourse, more generally) is the older Vedic literature. Many of the Buddhist terms for miracles and superhuman powers harken back to earlier Vedic literature, but even more directly contiguous with early South Asian Buddhist discourse on miracles and superhuman powers is epic literature, particularly the *Mahābhārata*, and the literature of early ascetic groups like the Jains, who were rivals of the Buddhists. Many of the ascetic groups in ancient South Asia not only shared a common vocabulary for miracles and superhuman powers, but held many similar beliefs, for instance, about superhuman powers as evidence of the achievement of sainthood. Mahāvīra, the Jain leader, was thought to possess omniscience and the

miraculous ability to teach all manners of beings at the same time. The ubiquity of claims to possess various types of superhuman knowledge and powers in ancient South Asia highlights the Buddhist concern with establishing the superiority and unique holiness of the Buddha. The appropriateness of the concept of the miracle in South Asian Buddhist discourse is tied to this overarching concern.

It is a measure of how terminological preferences have shifted in recent years that the *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, edited by Robert Buswell and published in 2004, includes a section on Buddhist miracles by John Kieschnick, but no separate section on Buddhist magic.<sup>15</sup> Kieschnick also uses the term miracle, albeit with reservations (which echo those of Foucher), in his study of biographies of Chinese Buddhist monks.<sup>16</sup> Yet, Kieschnick (like Foucher) advocates the use of miracle in a Buddhist context with the caveat that one redefine the term to emphasize its older, wider, Hellenistic meaning of wonder, as in the seven “wonders” (*mīraculum*) of the world. Yet, in his discussion of the Christian definition of miracle, Kieschnick follows many other scholars in emphasizing the sense of supernatural intercession contrary to natural law. He does not really consider how other components of the Christian definition of the miracle (or definitions largely influenced by Christianity) might find parallels in Buddhist notions of the miracle.

The religious significance of the miracle, its public, evidentiary nature, and the opposition between miracle and magic are all important elements in the Buddhist discourse on miracles and superhuman powers. Whether the superhuman knowledge and power on display is classified by Buddhist texts as mundane or transmundane, the Buddhist miracles testify to the unique holiness and sacred purpose of the Buddha. This sacred purpose is manifested in exhibitions of superhuman powers, which the Buddha

uses to impress others, subdue their pride and convert them to the Buddhist path. It is also reflected in the fact that the Buddha decides to teach the Dharma and lead others beyond rebirth and suffering. And this compassionate decision becomes embodied in the Bodhisattva vow to become a Buddha for the sake of freeing all sentient beings.

### South Asian Buddhist Literature

For this dissertation, I have drawn selectively upon texts (preserved mostly in Pāli and Sanskrit, but also some in Tibetan and Chinese) that span the history of Buddhist literature from the earliest extant canonical collections to narratives, commentaries, and scholastic treatises composed centuries later; this covers a period from roughly the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C.E. to the 5<sup>th</sup> century C.E. The canonical collection of Pāli literature that was taken to Sri Lanka, preserved and then disseminated throughout Southeast Asia (i.e., Burma, etc.) was likely redacted as late as the 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> century C.E. Thus, the rough cutoff date for this study corresponds to the approximate date of the redaction or translation into Pāli of the commentarial literature by Buddhaghosa. Since I draw significantly on the Pāli commentaries and the *Visuddhimagga*, it seemed convenient for me to cut off my analysis roughly in the 5<sup>th</sup> century.

Buddhist literature has a history that probably goes back to a period of time in ancient northern India (and Nepal) sometime between the 4<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> century before the Common Era (B.C.E.). The Buddhist literature that we possess today may still retain remnants of its earliest oral forms, but it likely dates from at least a couple centuries later. There is a complex story to tell of the history of the Pāli canon, and this is not the time or place to retell it. Although this canonical collection probably took its current form as

early as the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C.E, determining the relative age of specific texts and passages and assessing the impact of later emendations is an enterprise fraught with difficulty and one I choose largely to avoid undertaking in this study.

In addition to the Pāli canonical collection and the canonical collections of other Buddhist schools, I have also drawn extensively from non-canonical literature. As J.Z. Smith has pointed out, the very notion of a canon implies both inclusion and exclusion.<sup>17</sup> The implication is that canonicity ought not to be taken as a measure of historical priority. Similarly, I do not feel that the Buddhist canonical writings ought to be separated from the commentaries and given precedence over other types of non-canonical works, since I believe it likely that “canonical” and “non-canonical” literature evolved side by side for many centuries. Can we say definitively that the narratives contained in the *Dhammapada* or *Theragāthā* commentaries, for instance, all necessarily post-date the entire texts of the *Dīgha-nikāya* simply because the former are considered to be non-canonical and the latter canonical? I think not. The matter must be decided on a case by case basis, and in many cases, no definitive answer will be forthcoming.

Moreover, different Buddhist monastic groups and traditions chose differing methods of organizing their canons. Although the Pāli tradition chose to include the vast majority of narrative literature in its commentaries, other “early” Buddhist groups, whose canonical writings are partially preserved in Sanskrit, Chinese and Tibetan, included many narratives within their canons. One cannot simply rely on Pāli materials when studying ancient South Asian Buddhism.

Still, there is a staggeringly vast amount of Buddhist literature preserved in Pāli, Sanskrit, Chinese and Tibetan falling within the temporal scope of my study. Thus, I have

been forced to limit myself to a selective analysis of what I take to be representative texts. Some might call my selection of stories and scholastic literature idiosyncratic, and there is probably some truth in this assessment. I have been unable for reasons of time to be truly comprehensive. I had to limit my materials somehow, and often I chose to focus on works that I knew best or particularly liked for one reason or another. As a result, readers of this dissertation will find it lacking in discussion of many relevant and interesting topics, like the discourse on miracles, magic and superhuman powers in Tantric Buddhist literature, which likely developed later than the 5<sup>th</sup> century. While I initially planned to situate Buddhist discourse on miracles and superhuman powers within the broader context of South Asian religious and secular literature, there simply was not time to accomplish this task in the present work. Thus, there is certainly more work to be done, and I hope to add to the scope of my analysis in the future.

I also would like to acknowledge that South Asian Buddhist literature is a vague, broad and perhaps even slightly misleading designation. I use it advisedly as an alternative such classificatory terms as “Indian Buddhism,” or “Southern Buddhism” and “Northern Buddhism.” I do sometimes use Indian Buddhism as a synonym for South Asian Buddhism, but like others, I generally reject the usefulness of distinguishing between Southern and Northern Buddhism. None of these terms designate types of Buddhism, much less a specific, monolithic type of Buddhism in contrast, say, to Chinese Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism, Japanese Buddhism or even Central Asian Buddhism. They simply designate geographical regions where Buddhism once flourished.

In my usage, South Asian Buddhist literature refers to an extremely diverse and differentiated range of Buddhist texts that may generally be said to have been composed



somewhere in a broad geographical region that is covered by the contemporary nations of South Asia: India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan and Sri Lanka. In addition, some of the texts I use were probably composed in the Northwest of the Indian subcontinent in what is now Afghanistan, or in another part of Central Asia. Although South Asian Buddhist literature fails to encompass all of this geographical area, I deem it slightly preferable to the term Indian Buddhist literature.

There is no perfect term that aptly covers this geographical area. Some may argue that Indian Buddhism better fits the focus of my work. It is true that India denotes a cultural force that goes back many centuries, and its influences were felt far beyond the Indian subcontinent, but it is a term that is most immediately associated with the modern nation in many people's minds. Thus, the constant use of Indian Buddhism in the context of Buddhist literature can lead some to forget about Nepal, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Tibet and other areas in the larger geographical distribution of South Asian Buddhist literature.

#### Miracle Tales: Text and Context

Perhaps because they focus on the evidentiary purpose of miracles, discussions of miracle stories have sometimes tended to suggest a parallel between the audience of the miracle in the story and the reader of the story. Those who hear or read accounts of miracles can put themselves in the place of witnesses. This parallel is also suggested by the oral nature of the literature, with its relationship between storyteller and audience. While clearly some Buddhist miracle stories suggest that one draw the parallel between

witness and reader or audience, there is danger in identifying the literary and ideal worlds constructed by the stories with the broader social and historical worlds in which stories are composed. It is not a straightforward step from reading or hearing a story to interpreting its context and uses.

Did those who told such stories intend to convert their audiences by means of them, or were the stories enjoyed for their entertainment value? In all likelihood, both things are true to some extent. Some likely did and still do believe that the Buddha possessed superhuman knowledge and power, and that he and his eminent disciples performed miracles of one sort or another, but whether miracle stories strengthened that belief or simply catered to it is impossible to know from the stories themselves. A literary analysis based on reader response is circular in the way that it projects its reading of the story onto the larger historical context.

Miracles are an important element in Buddhist art and ritual. A more complete discussion of the social and historical significance of miracles and miracle stories in Buddhist cultures must treat this larger context. Though the present work focuses on literary materials, one should not get the impression that I give put literature above other important sources for the history of miracle stories in South Asian Buddhism. There has been a tendency to see texts as prior to art, but in the case of the Buddha's miracles, the artistic representations often may have influenced the stories. Images of the Buddhist miracles are found on frescoes and steles that once decorated sacred Buddhist sites throughout ancient South Asia and elsewhere, and some of these depictions probably predate any of the literary versions we actually possess. Yet, it would seem that art must have its sources, as well. We have no way of knowing when or by whom stories about the

Buddha's miracles began to be told.

We do know that Buddhists built sacred monuments housing the relics of the Buddha and commemorating, among other things, the miracles in the Buddha's life. This suggests pilgrimage as part of the larger context in which we can understand the Buddhist miracle literature. Hearing stories of what supposedly occurred at a place is one way for a pilgrim to identify him or herself with the place. It is likely that Buddhist pilgrims did hear miracle tales when they went on pilgrimage to the sacred sites commemorating the Buddha's life. For instance, the Chinese Buddhist pilgrims, Faxian and Xuanzang, who traveled in South Asia in 399-414 C.E. and 629-645 C.E., respectively, both describe the places they visited by recounting the stories of the miracles that occurred there.<sup>18</sup> Many of their stories are similar to versions found in Buddhist literature, but Faxian and Xuanzang also sometimes recount local legends that they probably heard on the spot.

In his introduction to Jean Przyluski's translation of a series of apocryphal stories that detail the Buddha's nighttime, miracle-working journey through Northwest India, Sylain Lévi long ago suggested that these stories indicate that the *Mūlasārvāstivāda-Vinaya*, which contains them, must have been redacted somewhere in that region.<sup>19</sup> The purpose of these stories, he surmises, must have been to transform the region into a "sacred land." Archeologists ought to give some credence, he says, to the places glorified in the stories. Faxian and Xuanzang both report having visited some of these sites.

Lévi's introduction seems to me another good example of the way in which stories are often placed in the service of history. Lévi's comments give the miracle stories of the Buddha's nighttime journey to the Northwest a historical time and place and a purpose. Many scholars have worked on the topic of miracles by combining a study of

Buddhist art, narrative and ritual. As indicated above, Alfred Foucher was the pioneer who first drew significant attention to the miracles of Śrāvastī and Sāṅkāśya in Buddhist art and narrative.<sup>20</sup> In his biography of the Buddha, organized in terms of the “eight great miracles” (*aṣṭamahāprātihārya*), he noticed that the locations of these events became significant places of pilgrimage for ancient Buddhists from India and beyond. Faxian and Xuanzang also visited them on their sojourns through South Asia.

Other scholars have pointed to some of the ritual contexts in which certain miracles are enacted and commemorated. For instance, in a forthcoming paper on the story of the Buddha’s miraculous descent on a jeweled staircase from the Trayastrimśa heavens, one of the eight miracles of the Buddha, John Strong masterfully combines analysis of the narrative traditions with a discussion of pilgrimage and other rituals that reenact the miracle.

Yet, questions of context in regard to the miracle stories in South Asian Buddhist literature are difficult to answer, and they always involve a delicate guessing game, given the relative paucity of external evidence. Perhaps, for many of the stories, there was simply no significant historical context outside the storytelling imagination of a few Buddhist scholar-monks. Without in any way denying the worthiness and usefulness of thinking about the context in which a story may have been composed and the uses to which it may have been put, I try to pay closest attention throughout this study to the literary qualities of miracle stories. What generic conventions of storytelling do they possess? What abilities do the characters possess, and how are these powers employed? Under what circumstances do characters use their superhuman powers or question those of others? What situations are apt for a miracle? Such questions as these have oriented my reading of Buddhist miracle stories towards conceiving the imagined universe

constructed by the narratives themselves.

Focusing as I do on the stories as literary works, I open myself to the potentially significant criticism that I do not adequately address the social context of these stories or their importance (or lack thereof) to Buddhist communities. Neither do I explore how they may have been put to use in ritual, pilgrimage or other possible storytelling contexts, nor the possible influence of Buddhist art on how these miracles are conceived in narrative. Neither do I attempt to conjecture on how a “typical” member of the four-fold South Asian Buddhist community (of monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen) might have felt about these miracle stories, nor how they might have read or responded to them. I also generally avoid discussions of the possible social or psychological significance of belief in miracles or magic. Some of these avenues of research may bear more fruit than others. I hope to explore some of them as I revise the present work for wider publication, and I also look forward to other scholars’ attempts to do so.

Though I remain fairly content in the belief that there will remain little that can be said with any great degree of certainty about the contexts in which Buddhist miracle stories were composed, why they were written, how they were read, and by whom, at the very least, I have made a point of drawing extensively on both narrative and scholastic materials. Scholars have sometimes relegated Buddhist miracle stories to “popular” or “folk” literature, suggesting that they are merely accretions to an earlier, rationalist tradition. While I stand by the claim that even relative dating of South Asian literature is fraught with difficulty, I do wish to contest the claim that there is a discernable difference between “popular” and “elite” perspectives in the varied, multi-vocal Buddhist discourse on miracles and superhuman powers. This point is similar in some ways to that made in a different context by Peter Brown, who argued that the rise of the cult of the saints in early

Christian Europe was not simply due to an upsurge in popular beliefs, but also included the continuation of significant elements from elite cultural and religious traditions.<sup>21</sup>

This dissertation is an experiment in reading a portion of South Asian Buddhist literature through the lens provided by Buddhist scholastic classifications of miracles and superhuman powers. Reading South Asian Buddhist literature through its miracle tales results in some seemingly familiar concepts taking on new shades of meaning, as in the case of significant events in the Buddha's sacred biography, and in regard to the relationship between Buddhist conceptions of knowledge and power as they relate to meditation. Though this hermeneutical exercise probably exaggerates the importance of miracles and superhuman powers in South Asian Buddhist literature, my hope is that it does so in a way that approaches a truer appreciation of their significance and provokes other readers and translators of Buddhist literature to reconsider the place afforded miracles, magic and superhuman powers in the South Asian Buddhist imagination.

Chapter Two introduces the relevant Buddhist terminology and categories for the miracle while addressing both positive and critical views found in Buddhist texts of the role of miraculous displays of superhuman power. Chapter Three draws out a corpus of Buddhist miracle tales, while demonstrating the narrative form and rhetoric underlying a wide variety of different types of Buddhist miracles. Chapter Four turns to an examination of various Buddhist typologies of superhuman knowledge and power, uncovering a tension between types of superhuman knowledge and power similar to that found in the Buddhist typology of miracles between teaching the Dharma and displaying superhuman powers. Chapter Five then analyzes miracles in select Mahāyāna scriptures, considering how these miracles build upon the "mainstream" Buddhist discourse on miracles and superhuman powers.

We will see how Buddhists traditionally distinguish between miracles and magic in order to argue for the unique authority and supreme holiness of the Buddha, and by extension, the superiority of his most exalted disciples, teachings and institutions. Though Buddhists debated the efficacy and meaning of displaying their superhuman powers, they agreed that more than mere marvels or magic shows, miraculous displays of superhuman knowledge and power have religious significance. They generate faith among those who witness or hear accounts of them and lead people to achieve freedom from suffering.

Despite the theological intent of the traditional Buddhist separation between magic and miracles, some South Asian Buddhist scriptures and treatises suggest that Buddhist miracles are ultimately neither: they are not simply techniques of power, nor are they the manifestation of a transcendent power beyond the natural order of things. Collapsing the dichotomy between miracles and magic, these scriptures evoke the metaphor of the Buddha as a great magician, who manipulates reality because magical illusion is itself a metaphor for the nature of reality. Thus, Buddhist miracles are exhibitions of techniques connected to the spiritual accomplishments of Buddhas, Arhats and Bodhisattvas, but at the same time, they are expressions of a truth that is not merely technical or mundane, but beyond ordinary conception.

This study has broader implications for the concepts of miracle, magic and superhuman power in other South Asian religious traditions roughly contemporaneous with the Buddhist traditions, such as the Jain and Yogic traditions, and for Western categories of miracle and magic. Buddhist discourse shares much of its vocabulary for the miraculous with these other South Asian religious traditions, and even when their ontological suppositions differ, these traditions all conceive a connection between superhuman abilities and sanctity. Given the shared suppositions and vocabulary of these

different traditions, the distinction between magic and miracles becomes one way of sanctioning the authority and preeminence of one tradition over others. In a Western context as well, the tension between miracles and magic and the problem of discerning between them have a long history. These comparative issues are largely for future consideration, however. Though I return to them in the conclusion, I do not address them in great depth in what follows. We begin instead with a look at the smile of the Buddha, a common narrative element found in both non-Mahāyāna and Mahāyāna Buddhist miracle literature.



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<sup>1</sup> Locke 1958: 78-87.

<sup>2</sup> Fleetwood 1733: 125-172.

<sup>3</sup> Foucher 1949: 270-271.

<sup>4</sup> See PED entry for *iddhi*, p. 120. Rhys Davids 1899: 272. See also Lamotte, *Traité*, vol. 1, pp. 10, 18.

<sup>5</sup> Hume 1999: 173.

<sup>6</sup> Swinburne 1970: 8. In this passage, Swinburne is not explicitly talking about Buddhism, but about the concept of miracle in a Western context.

<sup>7</sup> Swinburne 1970: 9.

<sup>8</sup> This is largely the topic of Keith Thomas' *Religion and the Decline of Magic*. As Kieschnick points out, Thomas's conclusions have been criticized by a number of scholars. See Kieschnick 1997: 175-176, n. 130.

<sup>9</sup> Take, for instance, the title of Bronislaw Malinowski's anthropological work: *Magic, Science and Religion*. For a detailed discussion, see Tambiah 1990. In the field of child psychology, which has more recently begun to draw upon anthropology and comparative psychology of religion, there has been some interest in these categories. See, for instance, the article by Pascal Boyer and Sheila Walker in the fascinating collection of essays, entitled *Imagining the Impossible: Magical, Scientific, and Religious Thinking in Children* (Rosengren, Johnson, and Harris: 2000).

<sup>10</sup> See also Sardan 1992.

<sup>11</sup> La Vallée Poussin 1908: 255-257

<sup>12</sup> MacCullough 1908: 676. The author also acknowledges a popular sense of the term: "actions that are contrary to natural order."

<sup>13</sup> Fleetwood 1733: 129ff

<sup>14</sup> Brown 1928.

<sup>15</sup> Kieschnick 2004

<sup>16</sup> Kieschnick 1997: 96-97.

<sup>17</sup> See Smith's groundbreaking essay, "Sacred Persistence: Toward a Redescription of Canon" (Smith 1982: 36-52).

<sup>18</sup> For a translation of Faxian's account, see Legge 1886. For a translation of Xuanzang's account, see Li 1996 or Watters 1904-1905.

<sup>19</sup> Przyluski 1914:493-5.

<sup>20</sup> Foucher 1909.

<sup>21</sup> Brown 1981.

## Chapter II

### The Buddhist Miracle

#### The Smile of the Buddha

In a well-known story from the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* of the Pāli Canon,<sup>1</sup> a Brahmin named Doṇa is walking along the road when he spots a set of footprints with imprints of wheels perfectly formed with hubs, rims, and a thousand spokes. “How wonderful (*acchariyaṃ*), how marvelous (*abbhutaṃ*),” Doṇa exclaims, “These cannot be the footprints of a human being!” Just then, Doṇa sees the Buddha sitting beside the road, and notices the wheel marks upon the soles of his feet. He approaches and inquires, “Are you a god (*deva*)?” “No,” the Buddha replies. Doṇa then asks, “Are you a fairy (*gandhabba*)?”<sup>2</sup> “No,” the Buddha responds again. Doṇa asks, “Are you a tree-spirit (*yakkha*)?”<sup>3</sup> Yet again, the Buddha answers negatively. Doṇa is running out of possibilities. “Are you a human being?” No again is the reply. So Doṇa finally asks, “What are you?” The Buddha replies, “I am a Buddha.”

Buddhas are represented throughout the Buddhist literature of South Asia as extraordinary beings, and the lives they lead are portrayed in equally extraordinary terms. Narratives depict episodes from the Buddha’s life as a series of miraculous and fantastic events in which the Buddha is not merely human, nor divine, but a unique, superhuman

being with extraordinary powers and abilities.<sup>4</sup> Wheels on the bottoms of his feet, for instance, are one of the thirty-two bodily signs that he is a “great being” (P: *mahāpurisa*; Skt: *mahāpuruṣa*) with “superhuman qualities” (P: *uttari-manussa-dhamma*; Skt: *uttara-manuṣya-dharma*).<sup>5</sup>

To adapt a beloved song lyric from my early youth, one could say that the wonderful thing about Buddhas is that Buddhas are wonderful things.<sup>6</sup> Buddhist texts use similar words and phrasing. For instance, in the sub-commentary (*ṭika*) on the *Mahāpadāna-sutta* of the *Dīgha-nikāya*, quoted in the *Sārasaṅgaha*, a compendium of Buddhist doctrine compiled in Sri Lanka by a monk named Siddhattha between the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries C.E., the question arises: Why was the Buddha born among human beings and not among the gods? The text says: “Because Buddhas are wonderful things (*acchariyadhammā hi buddhā*), and the wonderful things about them would not be apparent if they were born among the gods.” Were Buddhas born as gods, the passage goes on to say, then people who see the wondrous qualities of the Buddha would attribute them to the “wondrous, powerful presence” (*anubhāva*) that gods possess, rather than the wondrous presence of the Buddhas. Thus, they would not gain faith in them.<sup>7</sup>

It is not a miracle that gods and other celestial beings have certain superhuman characteristics, such as the power of flight, divine radiance, clairvoyance, and so forth, but for the Buddha, a human being, to possess such marvelous powers and qualities is miraculous. Although others may possess some of the powers and abilities of a Buddha, Buddhas are placed in a category unto themselves. As the *Lakkhaṇa-sutta* of the *Dīgha-nikāya*, a discourse devoted to explaining the causes and significance of the thirty-two bodily marks of the “great man,” states: “Endowed with these marks....as a Buddha, he becomes chief, best, foremost, highest, and supreme among all beings.”<sup>8</sup> The Buddhist

discourse on the miraculous is partly concerned with demonstrating how it is the case that Buddhas are magnificent and supreme paragons of all living beings.

There is no single word in Buddhist texts for the miraculous, however. Instead, one finds a number of potentially relevant terms and concepts. Moreover, while many (perhaps all) Buddhist texts conceive the Buddha as a wondrous, superhuman being and his life as series of miracles, unanimity does not exist on the implications of such a conception. Instead, Buddhist texts contain a complex discourse in which several, possibly incompatible, conceptions of the miracle arise. Indeed, one sometimes finds ambivalence expressed towards displays of superhuman power despite the many such displays throughout Buddhist literature. Yet, underlying the ambiguity and plurality of voices, one may find a common conception of the rhetorical form and the function of the miracle. The displays of superhuman knowledge and power are considered to be miracles, because they generate faith in those who witness of them.

Relying on South Asian Buddhist narratives and scholastic literature, this chapter begins to examine this complex discourse, while introducing the terminology used to denote various types of marvelous events and superhuman powers. Perusing the *Pali Text Society's Pali English Dictionary* for a start, one can find numerous terms that have evoked translation and commentary in terms of the marvelous, the miraculous and the fantastic.<sup>9</sup> Some of these terms, like *pāṭihāriya* and *acchariya-abbhuta-dhamma*, denote miraculous and amazing events. Terms such as *iddhi*, *abhiññā*, *vijjā* and *uttari-manussa-dhamma* can refer to superhuman powers, magical abilities, and superhuman qualities of various sorts. *Vikubbana* can have the sense of transforming something or oneself into something else. *Nimitta* can mean a portent or omen, a sign that a miracle has occurred, whereas *nimmitta* means something or someone conjured with the power of *vikubbana*.

*Opapātika* has the connotation of miraculous birth. Terms like *adhīṭṭhāna*, *anubhāva*, and *saccakiriyā*, also convey various aspects of the miraculous and extraordinary, though they belie easy description.

Nearly all of the terms listed above have close equivalents in Sanskrit, and most, if not all, were translated or loaned into other languages in which Buddhist texts from South Asia are preserved, such as Chinese and Tibetan. Some of them denote specific things or events as well as generic categories. Many of these terms are also found as specific members of other categories. For example, *adhīṭṭhāna* and *vikubbana* appear as two of the ten types of *iddhi* enumerated and described in the Pāli scholastic treatises, the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* and the *Visuddhimagga*.<sup>10</sup> These terms or their Sanskrit equivalents are extended in meaning and application in texts like the *Gaṇḍavyūha-sūtra* and the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* to refer not only to specific types of superhuman power, but also to the superhuman powers of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas in general.<sup>11</sup>

We will see that wondrous displays of *iddhi* (Skt: *ṛddhi*, not *siddhi*, as often claimed) are one of the three types of miracle (P: *pāṭihāriya*, Skt: *prātihārya*). *Iddhi*, which often denotes both a great variety of superhuman abilities, and superhuman powers in general, is also one of the sub-categories of *abhiññā* (Skt: *abhijñā*), which also means something like “superpower.” Furthermore, the most common enumeration of the three *vijjā* (Skt: *vidyā*) or “knowledges,” is equivalent to three of the remaining five categories of six-fold classification of *abhiññā*. Interestingly, the three types of miracle are also connected more closely to the lists of knowledges and superpowers. Lists of terms embedded within other lists of terms form a web of interrelated categories that collectively constitute a range of terminology used to denote and classify the miraculous in Buddhist literature.

At the same time, there are attested uses of some of these terms where it is incorrect to read them in their precise technical meanings, reminding us that these words were also part of living languages in which words have many meanings depending on the context. We will have to look at fluctuations and variations in meaning depending on usage in different contexts in order to show how Buddhist texts play with these concepts, all the while arguing that miracles demonstrate the preeminent holiness of Buddhism.

With some of the range of interrelated concepts that comprise the terminology for miracles and superhuman powers in Buddhist discourse now apparent, the flavor of the discourse can perhaps best be introduced by seeing how a few of these terms are used in the context of a Buddhist narrative. For that, we can turn to the first story contained in the *Avadānaśataka*, a compendium of one hundred Buddhist tales written in Sanskrit, which dates perhaps to the 1<sup>st</sup> century of the Common Era.<sup>12</sup> This collection of stories also appears to have been the first such collection to be translated in its entirety into Chinese, during the 3<sup>rd</sup> century C.E. by an Indo-Sythian layman named Chih-ch'ien.<sup>13</sup> The collection contains many tales of the miraculous, but here we will only focus on one.

As the story begins, Pūrṇa, a wealthy Brahmin from the South, is undertaking ritual sacrifices in which hundreds of thousands of *tīrthikas*, or non-Buddhist ascetics, are being fed.<sup>14</sup> When his parents return from Rājagṛha, Pūrṇa learns about the glorious qualities of the Buddha. In the version of the story found in the *Avadānaśataka*, this is told in brief, but in the version contained in the *Kalpadrūmāvadāna*, the parents give a longer and fuller account. Hearing about the Buddha from his parents establishes in Pūrṇa the roots of faith (P: *pasāda*; Skt: *prasāda*), and he resolves to invite him to the sacrifice as well. While just hearing about the Buddha and his teaching can be considered a miracle, a number of more obviously fantastic events take place as the story proceeds.

First is the marvelous nature of Pūrṇa’s invitation, a simple offering of flowers, incense and water which takes on massive proportions that become visible in the sky above Rājagṛha many miles away. This, the story tells us, is caused by the “miraculous power” (P, Skt: *anubhāva*) that Buddhas and gods possess, rather than any special attainment of Pūrṇa’s own. When the Buddha reaches the South, ostensibly by flying, with a retinue of 1,000 monks, he uses his “superhuman powers” (P: *iddhi*, Skt: *rddhi*) to make his monks vanish and then goes to meet Pūrṇa. When Pūrṇa puts alms in the Buddha’s bowl, the Buddha uses his powers to create identical alms in the bowls of all the invisible monks, and then makes them all reappear. This composite event, which is called a “miracle” (P: *pāṭihāriya*, Skt: *prātihārya*), leads to a deepening of Pūrṇa’s (and perhaps, by extension, the reader/audience’s) faith and trust. Faith leads him to take a vow to achieve “unexcelled, perfect and complete awakening” (P: *anuttara-sammā-sambodhi*, Skt: *anuttara-samyak-sambodhi*), and the Buddha responds by prophesizing his future success.<sup>15</sup>

The Buddha’s prophecy of the future fulfillment of Pūrṇa’s vow is itself a miraculous event, showing the Buddha’s ability to see into the future destiny of other beings. This miracle of prophecy is also indicated in the story by prodigious signs and portents in the form of marvelous, multicolored rays of light that emanate from the Buddha’s smile. The description is worth quoting here in full:

When Blessed Buddhas smile, it is in the nature of things (*dharmatā*) that rays of blue, yellow, red, and orange light come out of their mouths, some going downwards, others going upwards. Those that go downwards penetrate the [many] hells [that are named] Saṃjīva, Kālasūtra, Saṃghāta, Raurava, Mahāraurava, Tapanā, Pratāpanā, Avīci, Arbuda, Nirarbuda, Aṭaṭa, Hahava, Huhuva, Utpalā, Padma, and Mahāpadma. In those hells that are hot, [the rays of light] are cooling. In those hells that are cold, [the rays of light] are warming. In this way, the extreme sufferings of those [hell]-beings are eased, and the thought occurs

to them: “When we fall from here, where will we be reborn next?” The Blessed One produces a sign (*nimitta*) in order to instill them with faith. Having seen it, they think: “We will certainly not fall from here. Nor will we be reborn elsewhere. For there is a being not previously seen by whose wondrous power (*anubhāva*) our extreme sufferings have been eased.” With that sign, they established faith in their minds and, after having experienced [the trials of] hell, extinguished their karma and grasped onto a connection with [the realms of] gods and men, where they [were reborn and] became vessels of the truth.

[The rays of multicolored light] that go upwards penetrate the [many] heavens [such as] the heaven of the Four Great Kings, the Heaven of the Thirty-three, Yāma’s heaven, Tuṣita, Nirmānarati, Paranirmitavaśavarti, Brahmakāyika, Brahmāpurohita, Mahābrahmā, Parittābha, Apramāṇābha, Abhāsvara, Parittaśubha, Apramāṇāśubha, Śubhakṛtsnā, Anabhrakā, Puṇyaprasavā, Vṛhatphalā, Avṛha, Atapa, Sudṛśa, Sudarśana, and Akaniṣṭha. The gods all cry out, “[Conditioned existence is] impermanent, dissatisfying, empty and without self!”<sup>16</sup> And [they] speak this double verse:

“Begin! Depart! Apply yourselves in the Buddha’s teaching!

Destroy the army of death, like an elephant would a hut made of reeds!

“He that practices this discipline and teaching without wavering will be freed from this cycle of rebirth, and will make an end of suffering.”

The rays of light zoom throughout the three-thousand-great-thousand-fold universe and repeatedly return to the Buddha from behind. Therefore, if the Buddha wishes to reveal actions from the past, [the rays of light] disappear behind the Buddha. If he wishes to reveal the future, they disappear in front of the Buddha. If he wishes to reveal a rebirth in hell, then they disappear below the soles of his feet. If he wishes to reveal an animal rebirth, then they disappear on his heels. If he wishes to reveal a rebirth as a ghost, then they disappear on his big toes. If he wishes to reveal a human rebirth, then they disappear on his knees. If he wishes to reveal [a rebirth in] the kingdom of a powerful wheel-turning king, then they disappear on his left palm. If he wishes to reveal [a rebirth in] the kingdom of an [ordinary] wheel-turning king, then they disappear on his right palm. If he wishes to reveal a rebirth as a god, then they disappear in his navel. If he wishes to reveal [an instance of someone achieving] the awakening of a disciple, then they disappear on his face. If he wishes to reveal the awakening of a solitary Buddha, then they disappear on the tuft of hair between his eyebrows. If he wishes to reveal the unexcelled, perfect and complete awakening [of a Buddha], then they disappear on the bump on top of his head.

This time, the rays of light circled the Buddha three times and disappeared on the bump on top of his head. Then, the elder Ānanda



placed his palms together in front of his chest [in a gesture of respectful salute] and questioned the Buddha: “A myriad band [of light] with a thousand colors has come out of [your] mouth and has illuminated the ten directions like the rising sun.” And he spoke these verses:

“Buddhas have exhausted rebirth and abandoned misery and passion; they are truly supreme objects in the world. Not without cause have the conquerors, who have overcome their enemy, showed their smile, which shimmers like the grooves of a conch shell.

“Those with the intelligence of a hero, who wish to hear the ascetic, prince among the conquerors, go at the proper time. The doubt that has arisen in them is removed by the supremely splendid and wise words of the best of sages.

“The mighty ones, the perfect Buddhas, who are firm like the waters of the ocean or the king of mountains, do not display their smile wantonly. For what reason do the steadfast show their smiles? The floods of people desire to hear.”

The Blessed One responded, “It is so, Ānanda, it is so. Not without cause or condition, Ānanda, do the perfect, complete Buddhas, those who have gone before, the Worthy ones, display their smile.<sup>17</sup>

This long passage tells us many things about the Buddhist universe, the concept of the Buddha, and the Buddhist conception of the miraculous. For one thing, we are told directly that the Buddha is foremost among living beings, higher even than the gods. We learn that miracles can be accompanied by fantastic signs, one of which is splendid rays of light emitted by the smile of the Buddha. We also understand that miraculous events in Buddhism are not unprecedented, strictly speaking. Nor are they supernatural, if one means by this term that there is nothing that we might term “natural laws” by which the events may be explained. This is clear not only from the detailed discussion of the varying circumstances governing how the rays of light behave. The passage also informs us that it is in the “nature of things” (*dharmatā*) that these rays of light should always accompany the Buddha’s smile.

Thinking about the story of Pūrṇa more generally, it is interesting how the miracle generates or deepens the faith of the central character and leads him to take a vow to achieve enlightenment and become a Buddha himself in the future. Similar scenarios are found in many Buddhist miracle tales, the analysis of which will go some way towards elucidating the notion of a miracle in Buddhism. In the *Avadānaśataka*, the exact same narrative structure holds for each of the first ten stories in the collection, all of which conclude in the same way with the Buddha smiling and prophesizing the future success of the person who has made the vow.

At a different level, however, the fantastic elements contribute to making a nicely paced and enjoyable story. Like a good entertainer, the Buddha of this story keeps Pūrṇa and the rest of his audience in suspense. It is one thing that he fills the bowls of all the monks with alms identical to those given him by Pūrṇa, but by first making the monks invisible, the Buddha can produce even more surprise and awe when they are finally made to reappear. One can imagine the audience's reaction mirrored in the story by that of the celestial beings witnessing the event who exclaim excitedly when the monks become visible again: "They are full! The bowls of the thousand monks are full!" Yet, this miraculous demonstration dwarfs in comparison with the magnificence of the Buddha's smile, which seems to be the climax of the story. The Buddha's smile exponentially increases the faith-instilling quality of the miraculous demonstration, extending it to both gods and hell-beings. This narrative structure frames and highlights the significance of Pūrṇa's vow to achieve awakening.

Far from being exceptional, this story is actually typical of Buddhist narratives, which are filled with such miraculous events. As one reads more deeply into Buddhist literature, one begins to realize not only that such stories are common, but also that they

are told in stereotyped language with common stock-phrasing. The plots are often just as conventional; a miracle rarely if ever happens in Buddhist literature without someone becoming established in faith or gaining some new level of attainment.

Despite the commonplace nature of such generic conventions, however, the concept of a miracle remains a problematic one within Buddhist discourse. In addition to the plethora of miracles and marvelous events, one finds passages that seem to denigrate and question the efficacy of miraculous displays of superhuman power like the one in the story of Pūrṇa. The resultant ambivalence towards the display of superhuman power (but not necessarily towards the mere possession and use of such power) produces a tension that is one of the main features of the Buddhist discourse on miracles that we seek to understand. The next two sections will introduce some of the texts that best represent Buddhist critiques of miraculous displays of superhuman power, and will begin to analyze the extent of their critique.

### Miracles of Superhuman Power and Teaching the Dharma

For the student of South Asian Buddhism interested in determining the significance of miraculous displays of superhuman power in Buddhist literature, the *Kevaṭṭa-sutta* of the *Dīgha-nikāya* presents an interpretive challenge.<sup>18</sup> In this brief dialogue, a lay follower named Kevaṭṭa suggests to the Buddha that he instruct his monks to perform “miraculous displays” (*pāṭihāriya*) of “superhuman power” (*iddhi*) and “superhuman qualities” (*uttari-manussa-dhamma*) so that the prosperous people of Nālandā will develop even more faith in him. The Pāli commentary tells us what Kevaṭṭa might have had in mind: flying into the sky above the city and performing various kinds of pyrotechnics for the townspeople below. The implication of Kevaṭṭa’s suggestion

seems to be that the laypeople of Nālandā who bear witness such a display would give even more support, material and otherwise, to the Buddhist *saṅgha* or community.

The Buddha's initial response seems somewhat reluctant, if not downright perfunctory: "I don't give such instruction to the monks, saying, 'Go, monks, and perform miracles and superhuman feats for the white-clothed laypeople'."<sup>19</sup> Yet, Kevaṭṭa simply won't take no for an answer. Kevaṭṭa plays the role of the persistent student (the best kind, in my opinion), and we can all be grateful to him, because the Buddha of this story saw fit to give further explanation.

In the story, Kevaṭṭa seems unaware of the fact that the Buddha has in another context expressly forbidden monks from displaying their superhuman powers for the laypeople. Given the conceit of the story, this is perhaps to be expected, since Kevaṭṭa is a householder. It is likely, however, that the redactor and the audience of the text would have known about the Buddha's injunction. In his commentary, Buddhaghosa refers specifically to this rule in explaining why the Buddha said no the first two times Kevaṭṭa asked.<sup>20</sup>

The Buddha makes no direct reference in this discourse to the monastic rule or the narrative context in which it was handed down.<sup>21</sup> Instead he responds,

Kevaṭṭa, I have declared that there are three types of miraculous display, having directly realized them by my own higher knowing (*abhiññā*). What are the three? They are the miraculous display of superhuman powers (*iddhi-pāṭihāriya*), the miraculous display of telepathy (*ādesanā-pāṭihāriya*), and the miraculous display of instruction [in the Dharma] (*anusāsanī-pāṭihāriya*).<sup>22</sup>

This typology of miracles is one of the most common lists of miracles found in Buddhist literature. At first glance, it is curious that teaching the Dharma is included alongside the display of superhuman powers and telepathy in a list of the types of miracles. In what

sense is teaching the Dharma a kind of miracle? As we will see, Buddhist miracles often include instruction or preaching. The ability to teach the Dharma is also one of the Buddha's most profound types of superhuman capabilities. For this reason, the first sermon is often listed among the major miracles of the Buddha. So, teaching the Dharma is included here among a list of the miracles, but it also seems to be opposed in some sense to miraculous displays of superhuman power.

As the dialogue with Kevaṭṭa continues, the Buddha of this story actually criticizes the display of superhuman powers and telepathic ability:

[The Buddha said, "Suppose] someone who has faith and trust sees [a monk] doing these things. He tells this to someone else lacking in faith and trust, saying, 'Isn't it marvelous, sir, isn't it amazing (*acchariyaṃ vata bho, abbhutaṃ vata bho*), the great power and great might of this ascetic!' [However,] the one who lacks faith and trust would say, 'It is only by means of a "Gandhārī spell" (*Gandhārī nāma vijjā*) [or] a "Maṇikā amulet" (*Maṇikā nāma vijjā*) that he can perform [such things].' What do you think, Kevaṭṭa, wouldn't someone lacking in faith and trust say that to the man who possesses faith and trust?"

"Reverend Sir, he would say that," [answered Kevaṭṭa.]

"That is why," [the Buddha responded,] "I see danger in [such miraculous displays], and am troubled, ashamed and disgusted [by them]."<sup>23</sup>

Here, the text expresses ambivalence in regard to superhuman powers, including telepathy. What, precisely, is the problem with performing miraculous displays of superhuman power and telepathic ability? On the face of it, the reason given here seems to be that they are not particularly efficacious means of generating faith among the populace. Miraculous displays may impress the faithful, but those without faith can find other ways to explain them. For instance, the text says, the cause of the miraculous performance may turn out to be a "magical spell or amulet" (*vijjā, vidyā*), and not the truly acquired superhuman powers of a "saint" (*arahant, arhat*).

The *Kevaṭṭa-sutta* goes on to compare miraculous displays of superhuman power and telepathic ability with teaching the Dharma. After describing the miracle of teaching the Dharma in unambiguously positive terms, the dialogue concludes with a story seemingly implying that the Buddha and his teaching are supreme, because the Buddha (unlike gods and rival teachers) understands the world of *samsāra* (endless rebirth) correctly and is able to teach the way beyond it.<sup>24</sup> In other words, he teaches the Dharma based on his knowledge of reality as it is (*yathābhūtaṃ*).

Support for the idea that miraculous displays of superhuman power are ineffective means of conversion may also be found in the *Pāṭika-sutta* of the *Dīgha-nikāya*. In this multi-layered and confusing discourse, the primary antagonist is a man named Sunakkhatta. He appears in the story to have until recently been a follower of the Buddha. Another man, Bhaddaka, initiates the story by coming to ask the Buddha whether Sunakkhatta has really left the faith. Bhaddaka learns from the Buddha that Sunakkhatta has indeed left, but the circumstances of his leaving remain ambiguous.

It seems at first that Sunakkhatta's problem is that the Buddha doesn't perform any "miraculous displays of superhuman power" (*iddhi-pāṭihāriya*). After Sunakkhatta tells this to the Buddha, the Buddha at first replies that he has made no promises to perform miracles. "Whether miracles are performed or not," he says, "the purpose of teaching the Dharma is to lead whoever practices it to the total destruction of suffering. What purpose would miraculous displays of superhuman power serve?"<sup>25</sup> This discourse does not explicitly refer to the three types of miracle, but miraculous displays of superhuman power seem clearly to be opposed to teaching the Dharma in the text.

However, following this episode, the text proceeds with a series of additional episodes in which Sunakkhatta actually witnesses the Buddha performing various

miracles of superhuman power: miracles of predicting future events, miracles of clairvoyance, levitation, blazing forth a radiant aura, and so forth. After each performance, the Buddha asks Sunakkhatta again: “Have I performed a miracle or not?” In each case, Sunakkhatta replies, “Certainly, a miracle has been performed.” The Buddha then admonishes him, saying “Well, then, foolish man, do you still say to me, after I have performed this miracle, ‘Well, Blessed One, you have not performed any miracles.’ Consider how much the fault is yours.”

It is unclear how the episodes in which the Buddha performs miracles are meant to relate to the first episode of the story when the Buddha does not and seemingly implies that he will not. Whether the succeeding episodes in which miracles occur are supposed to be considered back-stories, alternate versions, or part of an ongoing series of exchanges between Sunakkhatta and the Buddha, each episode concludes in parallel fashion, with the Buddha admonishing Sunakkhatta, who “leaves like one condemned to hell.” Thus, the story stresses that Sunakkhatta is ultimately to blame for his own failures.

The *Pāṭika-sutta* first tells us that the purpose of teaching the Dharma is leading others to freedom from suffering, and that miraculous displays of superhuman powers serve no useful purpose in that regard. Then, the discourse goes on to describe a variety of ineffective miracles that the Buddha performs. Ostensibly, these miracles demonstrate in some way Sunakkhatta’s reasons for desiring to leave the community of those faithful to the Buddha. But Sunakkhatta still leaves the faith even after he has witnessed the miracles. Apparently, the miracles are ineffective for reestablishing Sunakkhatta’s faith, but the question arises: Does the problem lie with the miracle, with Sunakkhatta or with

both? Sunakkhatta's problem seems to have been something more than the absence of miracles.

Although ambiguous, the discourse supports a number of general points. First, the Buddha leads others beyond suffering through teaching them the Dharma. Miraculous displays of superhuman power are tangential to this purpose, and seemingly powerless to stop Sunakkhatta from leaving the faith.<sup>26</sup> At the same time, however, the *Pāṭika-sutta* also makes it clear that the Buddha could and did perform miracles by means of his superhuman powers on numerous occasions, evoking the language and typology of miracles and superhuman powers described elsewhere in Buddhist literature.

The *Pāṭika-sutta* and the *Kevaṭṭa-sutta*, each in its own way, evokes the tension between the denigration of miraculous displays of superhuman power, for lack of effectiveness or some other reason, and the countless examples in Buddhist literature of miracles that are effective for converting beings of various types, celestial and human. They also both seem to oppose displays of superhuman power with teaching the Dharma, which the *Kevaṭṭa-sutta* describes as two of the three types of miracle.

In the later Sanskrit scholastic treatise, the *Abhidharmakośa* and its *bhāṣya* or commentary, the typology of the three types of miracle is also found. As in the Pāli tradition, Vasubandhu emphasizes teaching the Dharma as the best kind of miracle. Vasubandhu gives two arguments to explain why the miracle of teaching is the best of the three miracles. Firstly, echoing the logic and terminology of the *Kevaṭṭa-sutta*, he argues that the first two types of miraculous display are also achievable by means of “magic spells” or “amulets” (P: *vijjā*, Skt: *vidyā*), like the Gāndhārī *vidyā* that gives one the power of flight and the Īkṣaṇikā *vidyā*, which grants the power to know the thoughts of others.



Not so for the miracle of teaching the true nature of reality, however. It is not possible to perform the miracle of teaching without truly possessing the knowledge of the destruction of the defilements (*āśrava-kṣaya-jñāna*), which is the third of the three so-called “powers” (*vijjā, vidyā*) or the sixth of the so-called “superpowers” (*abhiññā, abhijñā*). Such knowledge is characteristic of the Buddha’s superhuman knowledge and power, and evidence that he has truly achieved sainthood (*arahattā, arhattva*).

Secondly, Vasubandhu argues, the first two types of miraculous display are useful only for impressing people at the outset (*pradhāna-āvarjana-mātra*). With the miracle of teaching, however, it is possible to obtain what one truly desires, the ultimate good (*hita*), freedom from suffering. “For,” Vasubandhu writes, “it is said that true ‘success’ (*rddhi*—the term I have been translating ‘superhuman power’) is only [achievable] through teaching the means [of achieving freedom from suffering].”<sup>27</sup> The argument is that teaching the Dharma is foremost among the miracles, because it will lead the faithful person along the path to the ultimate good. Vasubandhu seems to accept, on this line of thinking, the efficacy of miraculous displays of superhuman power and telepathic ability, but only for the purpose of initial conversion. At least, the three types of miraculous displays each perform their respective roles.

The Mahāyāna treatise known as the “Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom” (*Mahāprajñāpāramitā-śāstra*) upholds the efficacy of miraculous displays of superhuman knowledge and power even more forcefully. The Bodhisattva develops superhuman knowledge and power (*abhiññā, abhijñā*) in the interest of other beings and manifests marvelous and amazing things so that the minds of other beings become pure. If he did not do marvelous things, he would not be able to inspire as many beings to strive for the ultimate good.<sup>28</sup> The *Bodhisattvabhūmi*, another Mahāyāna treatise, also

explains that one of the purposes of superhuman power (*iddhi, rddhi*) is to introduce people into the Buddha's teaching by converting them with a miraculous display.<sup>29</sup>

In its own way, the *Kevaṭṭa-sutta* also illustrates the connection that Buddhists perceived between the performance of miracles and religious conversion, which Buddhist texts call generating "faith" (*pasāda, prasāda*). It seems to say that miraculous displays of superhuman power and telepathy are ineffective for conversion, because they are not necessarily proof of true attainment. Vasubandhu agrees that teaching the Dharma is the best type of miracle, because the Buddha is a true saint and only he understands reality correctly and knows the way beyond it. Yet, he never explicitly says that miracles of superhuman power are ineffective for conversion.

In the second of his arguments, Vasubandhu actually says the opposite: miraculous displays of superhuman power are useful for converting the faithful at the outset, but teaching the Dharma will lead them beyond suffering. In this regard, Vasubandhu stakes out a position somewhere in between the *Kevaṭṭa-sutta* and Mahāyāna texts like the *Bodhisattvabhūmi* and *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-sāstra*. The position seems generally to echo the later Pāli scholastic treatises and commentaries, in which miraculous displays of superhuman power are frequent and well-documented.

### Three Monastic Rules (and Various Exceptions)

If the *Kevaṭṭa-sutta* means to establish the superiority and unique holiness of the Buddha by denigrating displays of superhuman powers and lauding the miracle of teaching the Dharma, it does so in a roundabout fashion. Remember that Kevaṭṭa initially asked the Buddha to instruct his monks to display their superhuman powers. Kevaṭṭa does

not ask him to perform miracles himself. It may be that the text implicitly connects the discussion of the three types of miracle to the monastic rule forbidding monks from displaying their superhuman powers. It strikes me that the phrasing of the dialogue implies that the author of the *sutta* knew the monastic rule. In a sense, the *sutta* could be interpreted as a commentary on the rule.

For anyone wishing to argue that Buddhists in ancient India were critical of the performance of superhuman powers, three monastic rules are paramount in importance. The first rule has been alluded to already. Monks are prohibited from “superhuman feats” (*uttari-manussa-dhamma*) and “miraculous displays” (*pāṭihāriya*) of “superhuman powers” (*iddhi*) to laypeople. In contrast to some of more ambiguous statements we have heard, the Buddha says about miraculous displays of superhuman power in the story of the monastic rule prohibiting their display: “Miraculous displays of superhuman power will not generate faith in those without faith, nor increase [the faith] of the faithful. Instead, they will keep those without faith from generating faith and cause those with faith to change [their minds].”<sup>30</sup> The Buddha uses the language in this statement on more than one occasion to state his opposition to a variety of different types of behavior in different circumstances, a fact that takes away from the strength of the statement against the display of superhuman powers. Despite this strong statement against them, the punishment for such displays is only censure.

In addition, a monk or nun may be expelled from the order if he or she lies about attainments that he or she has not really achieved.<sup>31</sup> This is the second rule of relevance to the possession and use of superhuman powers. Finally, a monk or nun may even be censured if he or she professes attainments that he or she turns out to possess.<sup>32</sup> When taken together, these three rules would appear to create an ironclad escape clause for any

monk or nun who is challenged by someone outside the monastic community to display his or her reputed superhuman powers. The monk can simply respond that it is against the Buddhist monastic regulations to do so.

Yet, the specificity of these rules might strike one as interesting. There is no denial of the *possibility* of attaining superhuman powers. Rather the efficacy of the display of superhuman powers is questioned, along the specific motive for using them. The commentary to the first rule states that the rule specifically rejects the miraculous display (*pāṭihāriya*) of only one type of superhuman power, the power to metamorphose oneself into something else or conjure objects out of thin air (*vikubbana-iddhi*), not the superhuman powers per se, that is the various types of superhuman powers classified as *adhiṭṭhāna-iddhi*, literally “superhuman powers [that are effected by an act of] mental resolve.”<sup>33</sup> In other words, the possession and use of superhuman powers are not objected to; it is their display in public that is prohibited. Thus, the mystique of the superhuman being is maintained.

Moreover, a monk may not lie about possessing powers, but neither can he profess to have them. The monk is thus legally justified in remaining coy about his special attainments, all the while claiming (perhaps) that what is unique about Buddhism is the Dharma, that is, the doctrine that leads one out of *samsara*.

The contexts in which these rules occur make it clear that intentionally lying about one’s attainments when one has an ulterior motive, knowing full well that one does not possess such attainments, is perceived to be a greater offense than displaying one’s superhuman powers. The narratives do not raise a question about whether Buddhist monks possess such abilities. In the case of the rule against lying, the long and detailed treatment of the rule concludes by clarifying the difference between lying about an

attainment that one doesn't possess, and simply making it known when one does in fact possess the ability. This is made clear partly by referring to the cases of Moggallāna (Skt: Maudgalyāyana) and Sobhita (Skt: Śobhita). Moggallāna is well-known as the monk with the greatest superhuman abilities, and he uses them in many narratives.<sup>34</sup> In one, Moggallāna sees hungry ghosts and other beings that are imperceptible to ordinary beings. Sobhita is said to be foremost among monks in remembering his past lives.<sup>35</sup> In this section of the *Vinaya* on lying about attainments, stories are related of instances in which Moggallāna and Sobhita admit to possessing superhuman abilities (*uttari-manussa-dhamma*).<sup>36</sup> Questions are raised about the correctness of doing so, and in both cases, the Buddha acquits them of wrongdoing.<sup>37</sup>

While no question is raised about the ability of Buddhist saints to perform miraculous deeds with their superhuman powers, there does seem to be skepticism expressed in some Buddhist narratives about the ability of non-Buddhist ascetics to perform such displays. Perhaps the best known example occurs in the story that prompts the Buddha to prohibit monks from making such miraculous displays.<sup>38</sup> When the story opens, a wealthy merchant from Rājagṛha acquires a block of sandalwood, which he orders to be fashioned into a bowl. He then places the bowl atop a scaffold of bamboo poles, and challenges any ascetic with superhuman powers to fly up and take it. The *Dhammapada* commentary elaborates on the merchant's motivations:

In this world, there are many people who say, "We are saints (*arhat*), we are saints." For my part, however, I have not seen a single saint....So I will make the following proclamation: "If anyone be a saint, let him fly through the air and take the bowl." If someone succeeds in taking the bowl, then my wife, my son and I will become his disciples.<sup>39</sup>

It seems the bowl was greatly coveted by the six teachers who were rivals of the Buddha, who all approach the merchant claiming to possess superhuman powers and ask for the

bowl. Can one blame the merchant for requiring proof? Interestingly, the proof that the merchant desires is a display of the superhuman powers that saints are reputed to possess.

The story told in the *Cūlavagga* of the *Vinaya* says little else about the ascetics, but in another version of the tale, Mahāvīra, the leader of the Jains, whom the Buddhists call Nigantha Nāthaputta, devises an elaborate ruse. First he sends his disciples to the merchant instructing them to ask for the bowl, saying, “Do not insist on us flying through the air for the sake of a mere trifle. Give us the bowl.”<sup>40</sup> The merchant refuses, so Nāthaputta gives the following orders to his disciples:

[Nāthaputta said,] “I will lift up a single hand and a single foot, and act as though I were about to fly up. Then you must say to me, ‘Teacher, what are you doing? Do not display your hidden qualities of sainthood to the multitude merely for the sake of a wooden bowl.’ So saying, you must grasp me by the hands and feet, pull me down, and throw me to the ground.”

Of course, Mahāvīra’s clever ploy is unsuccessful in persuading the merchant to give him the bowl, but it does humorously suggest the extent to which the rival teachers will go to get what they want without displaying their reputed powers. The implication is that they do not really possess such powers in the first place.

Although both versions of the story raise the issue of skepticism as a theme, the *Dhammapada* commentary makes it even more explicit. This is clear not only from the way in which the story elaborates the merchant’s motivations, and the humorous way it portrays the rivals’ scheming, but also from the way it depicts Piṇḍola Bhāradvāja’s decision to go and get the bowl. He and Moggallāna overhear a group of scoundrels (*dhuttaka*) talking about the merchant’s challenge:

The six teachers used to go around saying, “I’m a saint,” but when the merchant from Rājagṛha suspended a bowl and said, “If anyone be a saint, let him fly through the air and take the bowl,” no one has flown through

the air and proclaimed himself a saint. Today we know that there are no saints in the world.

Thus, the context for Piṇḍola Bhāradvāja's miraculous display ceases to be his desire to obtain the sandalwood bowl, which is all that appears to motivate him in the *Vinaya* version, and becomes a response to a challenge of the veracity of the Dharma.<sup>41</sup> In contrast, the *Vinaya* version could be said to be as much about coveting an expensive bowl and what is appropriate behavior for a Buddhist monk.<sup>42</sup> In fact, the *Vinaya* version concludes not with one rule, but with two. Not only is a Buddhist monk prohibited from displaying superhuman powers to the laity. This is followed by a second rule stating that monks may not use bowls that are made out of sandalwood.

If the *Kevaṭṭa-sutta* can be regarded as an oblique commentary on the monastic rule prohibiting monks from performing miraculous displays of superhuman power, then it is certainly not the only such story. Other stories make direct reference to these rules, though often with a decidedly different slant. Take, for instance, the *Divyāvadāna* version of the story of Pūrṇa, a wealthy trader and businessman turned Buddhist monk, not the same Pūrṇa as in the tale discussed earlier. After the Buddha decides to accept Pūrṇa's invitation and travel westward to Sūrpāraka with his monks in order to receive a meal in the newly constructed Sandalwood Pavilion, he says this to Ānanda:

Go, Ānanda, and inform the monks: 'Although I have said that you should live with your virtues concealed and your sins exposed, the city [of Sūrpāraka] is stiff with nonbelievers (*tīrthika-avastabdham*). Therefore, whoever among you has acquired superhuman powers should go to Sūrpāraka and receive a meal.'<sup>43</sup>

Here the Buddha calls upon his monks to wield their superhuman powers precisely because the hinterlands are rife with nonbelievers. Yet, the strength of the *Vinaya* rules would appear to be such that the author of the *Pūrṇāvadāna* saw fit to refer to them, and

depict the Buddha's journey as exceptional. Again, there is no question that Buddhist monks possess superhuman powers.

The versions of the story of the Śrāvastī and Sāṅkāśya miracles that one finds in the *Dhammapada* commentary and *Jātaka* tale 483 also contextualize the *Vinaya* rules. They do so by telling the reader what happened after the Buddha made the rule.<sup>44</sup> Like the story of Pūrṇa, the story of the Śrāvastī and Sāṅkāśya miracles may be seen as giving a notable exception to the *Vinaya* rules. It remains to be seen whether the exception is, in fact and for the most part, the rule. Unlike the various versions of the story of Pūrṇa, however, the story of the Śrāvastī and Sāṅkāśya miracles in the *Dhammapada* and *Jātaka* commentaries both focus on the theme of skepticism.<sup>45</sup> As seen above, the *Dhammapada* commentary goes so far as retelling the story of Piṅḍola Bhāradvāja that frames the rule in the *Vinaya*.

It was also mentioned above that there is a sense in which these rules might seem quite convenient, and thus lead one to doubt the intentions that lay behind them. One might think that such doubts would arise only in the case of the nonbeliever or the modern skeptic, and not for those who take these stories as truthful and authentic reports of what the Buddha said and did. It is striking, then, that Buddhist stories often address these rules by affirming the superhuman abilities of the Buddha and his disciples, and in some cases, shifting attention to the purported abilities and questionable intentions of the Buddha's rival teachers and their disciples. This is certainly the case with the versions of the story of the Śrāvastī and Sāṅkāśya miracles in the *Dhammapada* and *Jātaka* commentaries.

After the Buddha prohibited the performance of miraculous displays of superhuman power, the *Jātaka* story says:



Then, the rival teachers thought, “The ascetic Gotama has prohibited the performance of miraculous displays of superhuman power, so now he will not perform one himself.”

Their disciples were upset and said, “Why didn’t you take the bowl with your superhuman power?”

“Friends, it is not difficult for us,” they replied. “But who would display their subtle and exquisite virtues to householders for the sake of a worthless wooden bowl? Thinking thus, we did not take it. The Buddhist ascetics took it and displayed their powers out of childishness and greed. Don’t think it is hard for us to work such powers. Leave aside the ascetic Gotama’s disciples. If we want, we will display our superhuman powers with the ascetic Gotama himself. If he performs a miracle, then we’ll perform one twice as good!”<sup>46</sup>

Here we see the rival teachers hoping to trap the Buddha in his own rule. The issue is not whether the Buddha can perform a miracle or not, but whether he will accept the challenge. The rival teachers assume that he will not, since he has just established a monastic rule prohibiting such displays. In order to save face, they agree to perform a miracle, but only after the Buddha does so first. Of course, the Buddha won’t let them hide behind his rule. In the *Dhammapada* commentary, King Bimbisāra overhears the pronouncements of the rival ascetics and asks the Buddha directly about the rule. The Buddha responds by saying that the rule applies not to him, but only to his disciples, and compares himself to a king who sets limits on others, but retains certain privileges himself. Thus, he agrees to perform a miracle, setting the stage for the grand sequence of miracles at Śrāvastī and Sāṅkāśya.

The *Dhammapada* commentary details the elaborate ways in which the rival teachers try to foil the Buddha, but to no avail. The Buddha will perform a miracle. Could the rival teachers answer the challenge and perform miracles had they so desired? The *Dhammapada* commentary and *Jātaka* versions of the story cast much doubt upon their abilities, but do not state directly that they could not. Interestingly, however, the *Divyāvadāna* version of the story of the Śrāvastī miracles seems to make a clear

statement on this issue. In this version, the six rival teachers are characterized as deluded about the extent of their abilities.<sup>47</sup> They boast among themselves in a way quite similar to the *Jātaka* version. They arrogantly claim, “If the Buddha performs a miracle, then we’ll perform two. If he performs two, then we’ll perform four.” And so they continue, but this is mere boasting.

It is Māra, celestial tempter of monks and constant thorn in the side of ascetics, who overhears them. He resolves to instigate the affair that leads to the performance of the Buddha’s great miracle (*mahā-prātihārya*). Māra appears in the guise of the first rival ascetic, performs a miraculous display, and challenges the second. Then he appears in the guise of the second rival ascetic, performs a miraculous display and challenges the third, until all the rival teachers are convinced that they can perform miracles. But it is really Māra who performs all the miraculous displays. He has no trouble performing them, because he is a god, endowed with superhuman powers.

Māra’s role in the story puts the inadequacies of the rival ascetics in clear relief. They have no extraordinary abilities, but ignorantly believe themselves to be equal to the Buddha. Ironically, after the Buddha has performed his miraculous display, the rival ascetics ask the King how he knows that it was really the Buddha who had performed the miracles. They point out that superhuman powers may have various sources, and that agency is not always clear from the display.<sup>48</sup> While this may be true, it is really the ascetics who have failed to understand that the source of their own supposed powers has been Māra all along. Even with the introduction of Māra into the story as celestial antagonist, the comparison between the Buddha and the rival ascetics could not be clearer: the former possesses true holiness and commands veneration partly through the

display of his superhuman powers, while the latter are unmasked as frauds and mere pawns of greater forces.

In this and the preceding section, I have begun to illustrate my methods for discerning a discourse on the miraculous in the Buddhist literature of South Asia. I draw upon the range of Buddhist narratives and dialogues, including multiple accounts of the same event. Though Buddhists seem to have argued about the place of marvelous displays of superhuman power within the overall conception of the miraculous, they agreed on the rhetorical form and function of the miracle. Miracles establish the unique holiness of the Buddha and his eminent disciples, his teachings and institutions, and they work to generate faith in Buddhism among those who bear witness or hear accounts of those miracles. In the next section, I will explore in more detail a few of the specific Buddhist terms for a miraculous event.

### The Buddhist Miracle: Two “Discursive Strands”

In the first three sections of this chapter, we have already come across the term, *pāṭihāriya* (Skt: *prātihārya*), which I have been translating as miracle or miraculous display. It appeared in the *Kevaṭṭa-sutta* also as the generic word for such displays. I also mentioned the terms, *acchariya* and *abbhuta*, and the compound phrase, *acchariya-abbhuta-dhamma*. *Acchariya* (Skt: *āścarya*) and *abbhuta* (Skt: *adbhuta*) were the words Doṇa used to express his amazement at seeing wheels imprinted on the bottoms of the Buddha’s feet, and we saw the Buddha himself described elsewhere as a wondrous thing (*acchariya-dhamma*). As we will see later in this section, *pāṭihāriya* and *acchariya-abbhuta-dhamma* are sometimes also used synonymously to refer to specific sets of

events that form something like a cycle of miracles in the last life of the Buddha.<sup>49</sup> They also have figurative and idiomatic uses that shade away from their ordinary and technical meanings. Together, these terms constitute two significant, partially overlapping “discursive strands” for the Buddhist conception of the miracle.

*Pāṭihāriya* or its Sanskrit equivalent, *prāṭihārya*, is perhaps the most common Buddhist term for the miracle. It denotes a variety of miraculous, marvelous and portentous events. We have already seen examples in the story of Pūrṇa, the story of Piṇḍola Bhāradvāja, the Śrāvastī miracle tale, and other stories mentioned above. It is also used in the sense of the generic category: the types of event that are conceived as miracles, the common three-fold list of which includes “wondrous performances of superhuman power” (*iddhi-pāṭihāriya*), “marvelous displays of mind-reading ability” (*ādesanā-pāṭihāriya*), and “miraculous feats of instruction” (*anusāsani-pāṭihāriya*).<sup>50</sup>

Etymologically, *pāṭihāriya* appears to derive from the preverb, *paṭi-* (Skt: *prati-*), meaning towards, against, back, upon, in return, etc., combined with the verb root, *har* (Skt: *hr̥*), which means to take, carry, remove, and even destroy. This is the etymology that the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*, a Buddhist scholastic work often quoted in Buddhaghosa’s influential *Visuddhimagga*, seems to evoke to explain the meaning of *iddhi-pāṭihāriya*:

[*Iddhi*] removes (*paṭiharati*) desire (*kāma-cchanda*), malevolence (*byāpada*), sloth and torpor (*thīna-middha*), ignorance (*avijja*)...all defilements (*sabba-kilesa*). Therefore, [it is called] *pāṭihāriya*.<sup>51</sup>

Here, the explanation of *pāṭihāriya* links the acquisition of superhuman power (*iddhi*) to the practice of meditation on the Buddhist path. From this etymological explanation, one understands a connection between *iddhi* and *pāṭihāriya*, but it is difficult to see how the latter term comes to denote marvelous and fantastic events.<sup>52</sup>

In the *Abhidharmakośa*, however, Vasubandhu defines *prātihārya* as “at the outset carrying away (*haraṇa*) people who are ready to be converted (*vineyamanas*).” He explains *prāti-* as a combination of two prefixes, *pra* + *ati*, signifying “the beginning” and “extreme intensity,” respectively. Or, Vasubandhu tells us, miracles (*prātihārya*) are so called because they are used to “seize” (*pratiharanti*) people who hate or are indifferent to the Dharma.<sup>53</sup> These explanations involving argument from etymology draw a clear connection between miracles and conversion. Vasubandhu also tell us that the miraculous display of superhuman powers occurs at the beginning, and its nature he describes as intense.

Miracles (*pāṭihāriya*, *prātihārya*) also refer to a series of specific episodes in the life of the Buddha, as in the following passage from Buddhaghosa’s commentary on the *Mahāpadāna-sutta* of the *Dīgha-nikāya*:

[As Bodhisattvas (i.e. future Buddhas) in our final birth], we will display miracles (*pāṭihāriya*) that will, among other things, shake the earth, which is bounded by the circle of ten thousand mountains, when (1) the all-knowing Bodhisattva enters his mother’s womb, (2) is born, (3) attains awakening, (4) turns the wheel of Dharma, (5) performs the “twin miracle” (*yamaka-pāṭihāriya*), (6) descends from the realm of the gods, (7) releases his life force, [and] (8) attains cessation.<sup>54</sup>

The two occurrences in the passage of the term, *pāṭihāriya*, indicate some of the range of its meaning. First, it refers to a specific event, a miraculous display of superhuman power (*iddhi-pāṭihāriya*) known as the twin miracle. This suggests an early and close connection between *iddhi*, “superhuman power,” and *pāṭihāriya*, “miraculous or marvelous display.”<sup>55</sup>

Second, the term denotes each of the events listed in the series, not all of which might initially strike one as miraculous in the same sense. Included are the birth, the awakening, the first teaching of the Dharma, and the death of the Buddha, all of which

can be seen as seminal events in his life and mission. They are also portrayed as miraculous events, but not necessary because they include the display of superhuman power. Like the threefold list of miracles discussed earlier, this usage suggests, perhaps, an extension in meaning from the miraculous display of superhuman power (*iddhi-pāṭihāriya*) to other events perceived as wondrous, prodigious or somehow miraculous for other reasons.

While Vasubandhu and the *Kevaṭṭa-sutta* seem use religious conversion as a basis for connecting the three types of miraculous display, the passage from the commentary on the *Dīgha-nikāya* just cited gives a different indication about what makes all these events miraculous. They are accompanied by various signs, such as earthquakes, which mark them as portentous, prodigious events. When one looks at the narratives that describe miraculous events, such as those just listed among the eight miracles, one finds not only earthquakes, but radiant light, showers of rain and flowers, heavenly music and many other signs that mark them as portentous.

It seems likely that these lists of miracles of the Buddha were called *acchariya-abbhuta-dhamma* before they were called *pāṭihāriya*. The word *dhamma* (Skt: *dharma*) in this phrase refers not to doctrine, but to an event, object or quality. The vagueness of the term, *dhamma*, in the phrase, *acchariya-abbhuta-dhamma*, can be captured in the translation “wondrous, amazing thing.” The miraculous events in the life of the Buddha are called wondrous, amazing things. The body of the Buddha, with its thirty-two major marks and eighty minor marks of the superhuman being, is also called a wondrous, amazing thing.<sup>56</sup>

*Acchariya* is also the most common Jain term for miracle, though the word does not often appear alone in classical Buddhist texts.<sup>57</sup> Instead, it is quite commonly used as

an adjective in the exclamation, “That’s marvelous!” (*acchariyam vata bho!*) In these cases, it is always followed by a similar expression involving *abbhuta*, which then means something like, “That’s wonderful!” This expression of wonderment is ubiquitous throughout South Asian Buddhist literature.

The fact that *acchariya* commonly occurs alongside *abbhuta* is helpful for determining the meanings of both, but their etymologies are more difficult to determine than that of *pāṭihāriya*. Their common Sanskrit equivalents, *āścarya* and *adbhuta*, may have been formed on the basis of Pāli or similar Middle Indic terms, or they may have been present concurrently in Sanskrit and Prakrit languages for a long time. For they are also attested in early Sanskrit works and are found in ancient works of Sanskrit grammar and etymology, like the *Nirukta* and Pāṇini’s *Aṣṭādhyāyī*.<sup>58</sup>

The *Pali Text Society’s Pali English Dictionary* claims that the etymology of *āścarya* has been unknown since the late Vedic period. Monier Williams connects it to the verb form, *ā + car*, meaning to approach, to lead, but also to act, exercise or perform.<sup>59</sup> However, Buddhaghosa, the 5<sup>th</sup> century Pāli commentator, connects *acchariya* to “snapping one’s fingers” (*accharāpahana*).<sup>60</sup> Dhammapāla echoes this interpretation, and elaborates slightly upon it by saying that *acchariya* refers to something that happens “without a moment’s notice” (*anabhiṅha-ppavattitāya*).<sup>61</sup> *The Pali Text Society’s Pali English Dictionary* interprets this to mean that something happens that is “causally unconnected” to what preceded it. Yet, this takes some interpretation. While these explanations are perhaps suggestive of the term’s usage, they are not fully satisfying either from the perspective of etymology or meaning.<sup>62</sup>

Paul Tedesco connected *acchariya* to a different Pali word with the same spelling, *accharā* (Skt: *apsaras*), a species of celestial creatures that are connected with water and

have the many superhuman qualities, such as the power to fly and change shape at will.<sup>63</sup> Buddhist literature testifies to the fact that Buddhists were also aware of the play on words that the identical spelling of the two words could produce.<sup>64</sup>

*Abbhuta* has been connected to the Sanskrit terms, *abhva* and *adbhuta*, which scholars have argued both derive from a combination of the negative prefix, *a-*, and the verb root, *bhū*, which means to become.<sup>65</sup> Although it is difficult to see how this etymology could be unpacked, *adbhuta* is explained by the *Nirukta* as something unprecedented.<sup>66</sup> Yet, *abhva* is glossed therein as *mahat*, large. In usage, *abhva* seems to denote something huge or monstrous, which provokes wonder and fear. In the Buddhist context, the classical Pāli commentators also explain *abbhuta* as something that has not occurred before, and therefore inspiring wonder, amazement, and surprise.

As in the case of *pāṭihāriya*, we have to rely mostly on usage to make their meanings clear. Another important technical usage of *abbhuta* bears specifically on the relationship between *pāṭihāriya* and *acchariya-abbhuta-dhamma*. *Abbhuta-dhamma* is listed as one of the nine categories (*navāṅga*) of Buddhist scripture, and thus appears to represent a specific genre in the early classification of Buddhist narrative.<sup>67</sup>

There are different classificatory systems for Buddhist literature, including nine-fold, twelve-fold, and five-fold categorizations in addition to the more commonly known three-fold classification of *sutta*, *vinaya* and *abhidhamma*. Another possible categorization is two-fold: *dhamma* and *vinaya*, doctrine and monastic regulations. These systems organize Buddhist writings in different ways according to different principles. Among them, the nine-fold classification seems to organize the writings into styles or genres, depending on literary characteristics.<sup>68</sup>



What might this genre of stories about “wondrous things” (*abbhuta-dhamma*) have included? The Pali commentary gives us this explanation:

Discourses that should be [classified within the genre] known as marvelous events (*abbhuta-dhamma*) are those that begin with [such phrases as] “Monks, there are four marvelous and amazing things about [the elder] Ānanda...” and, in fact, all those connected with marvelous and fantastic things (*acchariya-abbhuta-dhamma*).<sup>69</sup>

Here the commentary quotes from one in a series of intriguing *suttas* found in the *Āṅguttara-nikāya* that list four marvelous and amazing things or events, one of which gives four pertaining to Ānanda.<sup>70</sup> However, the first *sutta* in the series tells us about four marvelous and fantastic events that occur when a fully awakened Buddha comes into existence.<sup>71</sup> The four events listed are as follows: (1) the descent into the womb, (2) the birth, (3) the awakening, and (4) the first preaching of the Dharma. Notice that these are some of the same events listed previously among the eight that were designated as *pāṭihāriya*.

Moreover, the *sutta* says that these miraculous events are marked by the following sign:

When, monks, the Bodhisattva [descends into his mother’s womb, etc.,] then an immeasurable, radiant light, surpassing the divine radiance (*deva-anubhāva*) of the gods, appears in the world, which is filled with divine beings, Māras, Brahmās, ascetics and Brahmins, humans and divinities. Even in the impenetrable, murky darkness of the space between the worlds, which even the sun and the moon, with their “great power” (*mahā-iddhika*) and “great, wondrous presence” (*mahā-anubhāva*), cannot touch, an immeasurable, radiant light arises, surpassing the divine radiance of the gods. The living beings that had been reborn there become aware of each other by that light and think, “Well, it seems that there are other beings living here.”

One now understands that fabulous rays of light are signs of portentous events in addition to earthquakes.<sup>72</sup> Later, we will see that showers of rain or flowers are included among the portents of such prodigious events. Here the intertextuality at play in Buddhist

conceptions of the miraculous begins to come into focus. Not only does this passage exemplify what might have been included in the genre of the miracle tale, and give further evidence that specific events in the life of the Buddha were perceived as miracles, it also bears striking resemblance to the description of the Buddha's miraculous smile that we found in the *Avadānaśataka*.

Although *acchariya-abbhuta-dhamma* rarely if ever refers specifically to displays of superhuman power, as *iddhi-pāṭihāriya* does, both *acchariya-abbhuta-dhamma* and *pāṭihāriya* come to designate a generic category of the miracle in which specific miraculous events in the life of the Buddha are classified. Thus, they designate two partially overlapping “discursive streams” in relation to the miraculous.

One can contrast the list of miracles of the Buddha that included the awakening, the first sermon, the twin miracle, and so forth with another list of four marvelous and fantastic events or things pertaining to the Buddha, which occurs in the series of discourses on four marvelous and fantastic things (*acchariya-abbhuta-dhamma*) in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya*. In this list, however, the four marvelous events that occur when the Buddha arises are: (1) people addicted to sense pleasure hear the Dharma and attempt to curb their addiction to sense pleasure; (2) prideful people hear the Dharma and attempt to become less prideful; (3) people addicted to excitement hear the Dharma and attempt to become calm; (4) people afflicted by ignorance hear the Dharma and try to see the truth.<sup>73</sup> Such events are portrayed as rare and special, miraculous in one sense of the term. It is a miracle when people hear the Dharma and take steps to walk the Buddhist path. Here, the scope of the miracle because the Buddhist path as the source of holiness and true knowledge, and the means beyond rebirth and suffering.

Elsewhere, in the *Majjhima-nikāya*, at one point the Buddha is described as teaching a Dharma or doctrine that is “miraculous” (*sappāṭihāriya*), literally, “possessing [the quality of] *pāṭihāriya*,” not “lacking in it” (*appāṭihāriya*).<sup>74</sup> One suggestive translation of the passage reads that the Buddha’s teachings are “convincing, not unconvincing.”<sup>75</sup> The Dharma is described as a miracle, because of its proselytical and hortatory power. A similar usage occurs in the story of the Buddha’s death, when Māra appears and tells the Buddha that the conditions have become ripe for him to die. Significantly, the Buddha cannot die until he has established a community of disciples, who are accomplished, skilled, and can teach the Dharma that “possesses [the quality of] *pāṭihāriya*” (*sa-pāṭihāriya*).<sup>76</sup> On this line of thinking, the miraculous qualities that the Buddha possesses are thereby transferred upon his death to the Dharma, the doctrines that lead people beyond suffering. An implication is that the miraculous power of the Buddha remains in the disciples and institutions responsible for preserving and continuing to teach the Dharma. This power also endures, one might note, in the remains of the dead Buddha’s body and in the places where miracles were once performed.

### Conclusion

We have seen that the concept of the miracle in Buddhist literature is a manifold one. It is closely associated both with the display of superhuman powers and telepathic ability, and the display of wondrous bodily characteristics like the wheel imprints on the bottoms of the Buddha’s feet, but it also includes the act of teaching the Dharma. Teaching the Dharma, along with many other significant events, can be conceived as a miracle in the sense that marvelous signs and portents often accompany the act. Teaching

the Dharma can also be conceived as miraculous, because it depends on part of the superhuman knowledge and power that Buddhas and Arhats acquire as a result of having traversed the Buddhist path to awakening and cessation of rebirth. Yet, teaching the Dharma is also an integral part of the process of securing and leading the Buddhist faithful to the acquisition of the greatest fruits of the Buddhist path: awakening and the cessation of suffering and rebirth. In this way, teaching the Dharma is an act of great religious significance for the world.

Moreover, teaching the Dharma, like displays of superhuman powers, is an event that requires witnesses. Peter Masefield was perhaps the first to describe the act of teaching the Dharma as type of revelation.<sup>77</sup> What is revealed is the Dharma, which is rooted in the Buddha's correct understanding of the true nature of reality.<sup>78</sup> The more important point for our purposes is Masefield's focus on teaching the Dharma as an event with certain specified outcomes. In order to conceive why teaching the Dharma is classified as a type of miracle, it is important to see the act of teaching not only for its content, but for what it does.

The Buddha's miracles—both his displays of superhuman power and his acts of teaching the Dharma—lead beings beyond rebirth and suffering. When given a role to play, the miraculous display of superhuman powers is said to be useful for initial conversion, that is, for generating faith in those who witness or hear accounts of the miracle. At times, teaching the Dharma also converts people, but as we will see in the next chapter, teaching the Dharma is an act that often comes directly after the display of superhuman powers. Thus, the two acts can form integral parts of the process of leading people to freedom from rebirth and suffering.

Sometimes, teaching the Dharma is described as the best type of Buddhist miracle and is contrasted with the display of superhuman powers. In the commentaries to the monastic rules forbidding the display of superhuman powers in front of laypeople, the distinction is drawn between displaying superhuman powers and merely using them. Buddhist monks ought to appear with their sins exposed and their virtues concealed, but there is no prohibition on the acquisition and use of superhuman powers. These powers come as a result of having traversed the path to awakening. Nor is there any explicit skepticism about whether such powers are possible.

Buddhist discourse makes it clear that miracles are events that convert people and lead them to higher levels of attainment. In order to perform this function, however, miracles must provide evidence of the supreme holiness of the agent of the miracle. The Buddha's supreme holiness is also signified by the signs and portents that occur during significant events in his last life, such as the birth and death. Moreover, when miraculous displays of superhuman powers are criticized in the *Kevaṭṭa-sutta*, it is precisely their evidentiary value that seemed to be called into question. Teaching the Dharma seems to be certain evidence of the superiority of the Buddha, whereas the display of superhuman powers may or may not be evidence of it. As we've already begun to see, Buddhist texts do not speak with unanimity on this issue of the efficacy and purpose of displaying superhuman powers. This will become even clearer in the next chapter, in which different versions of a variety of miracle tales will be compared and analyzed in detail.

<sup>1</sup> A ii.36-37. Pāli materials are cited in the method of referring to Pali Text Society editions of texts preferred by many scholars: Title of text (abbreviated), volume (lower case roman letters), and page number(s).

<sup>2</sup> A *gandhabba* (Skt: *gandharva*) is a kind of celestial creature in Indian mythology somewhat like a fairy or nymph. The word literally means “one who eats smells.”

<sup>3</sup> A *yakkha* (Skt: *yakṣa*) is another kind of celestial creature often thought to live in trees. Like *gandhabba*, however, the term eludes easy translation. I offer tree-spirit as one possibility.

<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, in the extended biography of the Buddha, which includes many stories of the Buddha’s past lives, known as Jātaka tales, the Buddha-to-be performs many different wondrous acts. The accumulated merit accrued from these acts is one of the factors that produce the superhuman powers and characteristics of the Buddha in his final lifetime.

<sup>5</sup> I will be translating the term *iddhi* or *ṛddhi* as “superhuman powers.” “Qualities greater than human” is a more literal translation of *uttarimanussadhamma*. *Uttarimanussadhamma* and *iddhi/ṛddhi* are used synonymously or with the former describing the latter in texts such as the *Kevaṅga-sutta* of the *Dīgha-nikāya* and the *Prātihārya-sūtra* of the *Divyāvadāna*. These texts will be analyzed below.

<sup>6</sup> The original is from the song, “The Wonderful Thing about Tiggers,” which was written and composed by Robert and Richard Sherman for the 1968 Disney film, *Winnie the Pooh and the Blustery Day*. Tigger’s theme song begins, “The wonderful thing about Tiggers is Tiggers are wonderful things!” The most wonderful thing about Tiggers, sings Tigger later in the song, is “I’m the only one!” Tigger was originally introduced by A. A. Milne in the 1928 publication of *The House at Pooh Corner*.

<sup>7</sup> DAṭ ii.27; See also Sasaki 1992:9 and Granoff 1996:80. The sentence, “Buddhas are wonderful things” echoes Ānanda’s words in the *Acchariyabbhuta(dhamma)sutta*: “Buddhas are truly wonderful, and they possess wonderful qualities” (*acchariyā ceva tathāgatā acchariyadhammasamannāgatā ca*). M iii.118ff.

<sup>8</sup> D iii.154.

<sup>9</sup> See PED entries for these terms.

<sup>10</sup> Psm ii.207ff.

<sup>11</sup> Gv: 3ff and Vkn: 73. The process that brings about these extensions in meaning is complex. The Pāli equivalents of these terms, *vikubbana* and *adhiṭṭhāna*, do not seem to be used to denote the general connotation. See my discussion below of VA.vi,1203.

<sup>12</sup> The story occurs at AŚ, pp. 1-7. A French translation, based on a manuscript preserved in Paris and the Tibetan translation, was made by Léon Feer. See Feer 1891. No English translation currently exists.

<sup>13</sup> Gjertson 1981:290.

<sup>14</sup> Offering food and other gifts to ascetics and religious figures was seen as a predominant form of gaining merit or good karma, which would then lead to better rebirths and ultimately to sainthood and *nirvāṇa* or cessation from rebirth altogether.

<sup>15</sup> In other words, Pūrṇa resolves to achieve the rank and status of the Buddha, the awakening of whom is often described using the words “unexcelled, perfect, and complete.” The implication is that there are different levels or types of awakening, of which the Buddha’s is greatest in all possible ways.

<sup>16</sup> Feer 1891:11 reads “Suffering is impermanent; the self is empty,” but I don’t see how Speyer’s Sanskrit edition could possibly say this. No variant readings are noted.

<sup>17</sup> AŚ: 6.

<sup>18</sup> Some manuscripts of the text of the *Kevaṅga-sutta* show *Kevaḍḍha* as a variant of the spelling of the name, *Kevaṅga*. The variant name of the text is thus *Kevaḍḍha-sutta*. Quite often in Western scholarly literature one finds references to *Kevaddha* or the *Kevaddha-sutta*, spelled without the diacritics. Needless to say, we are talking about the same text.

<sup>19</sup> D i.211ff.

<sup>20</sup> DA ii.388.

<sup>21</sup> The story of the rule occurs at V ii.112ff.

<sup>22</sup> Reference to the same three types of miracle also occurs in *Paṭisambhidāmagga* ii.227-229. I analyze these types of miracles and closely related lists in the next chapter. The *Mahāvastu* contains the same three-fold listing (Mv i.238), but also attests a variant list (Mv iii.137-8): miraculous displays of superhuman power (*ṛddhi-prātihārya*), miraculous displays of instruction (*anusāsani-prātihārya*), and miraculous displays of teaching the dharma (*dharma-deśana-prātihārya*). A comparison can also be made with miracles of the 11<sup>th</sup>, 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> days in the story of the miracles at Śrāvastī contained in the *Dharmaguptaka-vinaya*. See Rhi 1991:234-235. From these examples, one can surmise that there may have

been confusion about the meaning of the last two types of miraculous display, and that the most important point about the list is the distinction made between instruction in dharma and displays of superhuman power.

<sup>23</sup> D i.212-214. For stylistic reasons, my translation condenses two nearly identical exchanges into one.

<sup>24</sup> The story tells of a monk who went to all the gods asking each of them in turn where the four basic elements cease without remainder. None of them know, until finally the monk reaches Mahā-Brahmā, the creator of the world and greatest of all the gods, who takes him aside (so as not to embarrass himself in front of the other gods) and tells him that only the Buddha knows the answer to his question. The answer to the monk's question is *nirvāṇa*, and only the Buddha knows how to reach it.

<sup>25</sup> D iii.5.

<sup>26</sup> Despite the fact that Sunakkhatta is not reestablished in the faith after witnessing the miracles, the person to whom the Buddha tells the whole story, a renunciant named Bhaggava, seems to remain firmly convinced by hearing about them.

<sup>27</sup> AKBh: 868-869: *anuśāsana-prātihāryeṇa tu hitena iṣṭena phalena yogo bhavaty-upāyopadeśādityevāvaśyam rddhirityucyate.*

<sup>28</sup> Lamotte, *Traité*, Vol 4: 1819-20.

<sup>29</sup> Bbh: 54.

<sup>30</sup> V ii.112.

<sup>31</sup> V iii.91ff.

<sup>32</sup> V iv.23ff.

<sup>33</sup> VA vi.1203. Horner interprets the passage to mean that “a miracle is objected to, not psychic power that is volitional in nature” (Horner 1938-66, vol. 20: 152). In the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*, *adhiṭṭhāna-iddhi* and *vikubbana-iddhi* are the first two of the ten types of superhuman power. The former category includes the power of flight, walking on water, passing through walls and other solid objects, and so forth. For references and detailed discussion, see Chapter Four.

<sup>34</sup> A i.25.

<sup>35</sup> For Sobhita see A i.25 and *Theragāthā* verses 165-166. Moggallāna's ability to perceive hungry ghosts and other “spirits” is well known. The commentary to the *Vimānavatthu*, for instance, says the entire text is initiated by Moggallāna, who enters into meditation and embarks on a tour of the heavens to interview many heavenly beings about the deeds that resulted in their present rebirths.

<sup>36</sup> For this story of Moggallāna, compare V iii.104-108 with S ii.254-262.

<sup>37</sup> The Buddha's response to (the monks' accusation of) Moggallāna is interesting. He responds, “There are disciples (*sāvaka*) that truly see (*cakkhubhūta*), truly know (*ñānabhūta*), inasmuch as there are disciples that see, know, and directly perceive such things. I, too, saw [these very things] before, but I did not say anything (*na byākāsim*). I could have said something, but some would not have believed me (*na saddaheyyum*). And those that did not believe me would have felt discomfort and for a long time (*dīgharattam*, which could also mean all night).” The Buddha's explanation for why he does not tell people everything that he witnesses appears similar to the reason he gave for not ordering monks to perform miraculous displays of superhuman powers. Some people will not believe him. This explanation adds the point that those who do not believe him will suffer as a consequence. One could perhaps say that the Buddha does not tell everything he knows or sees because doing so would unnecessarily inflict more pain on those who are not ready to hear it.

<sup>38</sup> A shorter version of the story is found in the *Cūlavagga* of the Pāli *Vinaya*. A longer, more detailed version appears in the *Dhammapada* commentary (DhA iii.199ff), where it prompts the elaborate miracle cycle known as the Miracles of Śrāvastī and Sāṅkāśya. The same connection is made in Jātaka tale 483.

<sup>39</sup> Throughout this passage and those that follow, my translation owes much to the excellent work of Burlingame 1921, vol. 3:36ff.

<sup>40</sup> To the reader who knows the different stories, the manner in which Mahāvīra's words are phrased leads to the suspicion that the *Dhammapada* commentary draws its inspiration in part from the version in the *Vinaya*, or another version quite similar to it. For it concludes with the Buddha's admonition of Piṇḍola Bhāradvāja in the following terms: “How can you, Bhāradvāja, display a superhuman feat (*uttari-manussa-dhamma*), a miraculous display of superhuman powers (*iddhi-pāṭihāriya*), on account of a wretched wooden bowl.”

<sup>41</sup> Another version of the story found in the Chinese *Ekottara-āgama* alters Piṇḍola's thinking slightly, but retain the essentials. That version states that “Piṇḍola, even though he remembered the Buddha's

prohibition, displayed superhuman power and took the bowl in order to prevent the defamation of the Buddha.” T 1507: 43b. See Rhi 1991:31 n.67 and Lévi 1916:252-53.

<sup>42</sup> The same can be said of the version of the story contained in the version of the story of the Śrāvastī miracle in the Dharmaguptaka *Vinaya*. T 1428: 946c. See Rhi 1991:224.

<sup>43</sup> Cowell and Neil 1886:45; Tatelman 2005:178-79.

<sup>44</sup> Not all versions of the story of the Śrāvastī and Sāṅkāśya miracles connect it with the story of the Piṇḍola Bhāradvāja and the sandalwood bowl. For instance, the *Divyāvadāna* version does not. Certain aspects of this version will be discussed below and in more detail in the next chapter, but here I want to mention Andy Rotman’s new English translation of this story in the first installment of his complete translation of the *Divyāvadāna*. See Rotman 2008:253-287. I obtained a copy of Rotman’s translation only a week before the final draft of the present work was submitted.

<sup>45</sup> Could the reason be that the stories were intended for different audiences? Phyllis Granoff makes a distinction between miracles tales that were intended for audiences of nonbelievers and those that were told to the faithful. See Granoff 1996. However, the fact that there may be different narrative themes in Buddhist miracle stories doesn’t necessarily mean that the stories were told in different contexts to different people.

<sup>46</sup> J iv.263.

<sup>47</sup> They are called “not all-knowing, though believing themselves to be all-knowing” (*asarvajñāḥ sarvajñamāninah*). Cowell and Neil 1886:143.

<sup>48</sup> Whether or not agency is clear to the observers is at the heart of the distinction drawn in the *Visuddhimagga* between “miracles that are apparent” (*pākaṭa-pāṭihāriya*) and “miracles that are not apparent” (*apākaṭa-pāṭihāriya*). Vm 393-94.

<sup>49</sup> See, for instance, *Cariyāpiṭaka-aṭṭhakathā* 285, where these terms are used together.

<sup>50</sup> D i.212, iii.3; S iv.290; A i.170, v.327; Psm ii.227.

<sup>51</sup> Psm ii.228-9.

<sup>52</sup> The verb, *paṭi + hr̥*, is found in Pali texts in the sense of striking back or against, while the form, *paṭi + ā + hr̥*, is used more in the sense of taking away. See PED entries under *paṭiharati*, *paccāharati* and *harati*.

<sup>53</sup> AKbh: 869ff. Kośa on chapter seven, verse 47ab and following, p. 110. La Vallée Poussin translates *harāṇa* as “ravis” and *pratiharanti* as “on s’empare.”

<sup>54</sup> DA ii.241. I will have occasion to dwell at greater length upon the significance of what are sometimes called the “eight great miracles” in the next chapter. The specific events listed among the eight fluctuated over the course of several centuries, with some members dropping out and being replaced by others. These events are portrayed in narratives and bas-reliefs that will be analyzed in further detail in chapter three.

<sup>55</sup> Some have speculated that the use of the term, *pāṭihāriya*, to refer to such events as the birth, awakening, first preaching, and death shows an extension of the meaning of the term from its original reference to events like the twin miracle, which are “proper” miraculous displays of superhuman power. See, for instance, Parimoo 1982:1-2.

<sup>56</sup> See, for instance, *Dīghanikāya-tīkā* on *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta*, DAṭ ii.210.

<sup>57</sup> However, also see Granoff 1996:84. Granoff also cites a passage from a section called the *acchariyakathā* of the *Sārasaṅgaha*. This section of the text is devoted to the wondrous deeds of the Buddha (*kiriyaṃ satthu abbhutaṃ*). It would seem that this usage hearkens back to the use of *acchariya-abbhuta-dhamma* to refer to the specific events in the Buddha’s life.

<sup>58</sup> MW and PSED under *āścarya* and *adbhuta*.

<sup>59</sup> MW under *āścarya* and *ācar*.

<sup>60</sup> DA i.43

<sup>61</sup> VvA 329.

<sup>62</sup> Granoff, based in some measure on PED’s entry, has relied in part on this etymology of *acchariya* to argue that Buddhists conceived of a miracle as an “event that does not follow from an identifiable sequence of natural causes.” See Granoff 1998:84. Her other source of evidence is a passage in the *Milinda-pañha* on the “act of truth” (*saccakiriya*) that restores King Sibi’s eyes. That passage will be discussed later.

<sup>63</sup> This reference comes from Luis Gómez through personal communication. The Sanskrit equivalent would then perhaps be *āpsarya*, which is an unattested word, according to MW, though *āpsara*, pertaining to the *apsaras*, is given in MW, but without any textual source.

<sup>64</sup> See *Jātaka* 470 for an example.

<sup>65</sup> See PED entry for *abbhuta*.



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<sup>66</sup> Madhav Deshpande has suggested to me that *abbhuta* may derive from *abhūta*, with the doubling of the consonant resulting from the shortening of the penultimate vowel.

<sup>67</sup> V iii.8; M i.133; A ii.103; iii.86, 177; Pug 43; Miln 344; PvA 2.

<sup>68</sup> Lamotte 1958: 155ff.

<sup>69</sup> MA ii.106.

<sup>70</sup> A ii.130ff.

<sup>71</sup> Compare with M iii.118ff.

<sup>72</sup> Earthquakes are mentioned alongside radiance, which is described in passages identical to the above in the *Acchhariya-abbhuta-dhamma-sutta* of the *Majjhima nikāya* (M ii.118ff). The *sutta* also lists a number of other marvelous and wonderful things, but it could be said to focus primarily on what happens during the entrance into the womb and the birth. An interesting addition is the following marvelous and wonderful thing: the fact that the Buddha has feelings (*vedanā*) and concepts (*saññā*) that arise, are recognized, and pass away.

<sup>73</sup> A ii. 126ff.

<sup>74</sup> M ii.9

<sup>75</sup> Horner 1957, vol.2:210.

<sup>76</sup> D ii.105ff.

<sup>77</sup> See Masefield 1986.

<sup>78</sup> Masefield went a step further, suggesting an argument put forth by Andrew Rawlinson that the revelatory content of the Dharma is some kind of a transcendental entity embodied in the sound, not just an intellectually comprehensible set of teachings. While Masefield makes an interesting and thought-provoking contention, I agree with Paul Harrison that the bulk of Masefield's argument does not stand or fall with this argument. See Harrison 1987.

### Chapter III

#### Miracle Types, Miracle Tales

Buddhist literature of South Asia contains a complex, variegated vocabulary for describing miracles and superhuman powers. The last chapter showed that Buddhists of ancient South Asia, without denying that divinities and certain exceptional human beings could and did possess “superhuman powers,” nonetheless articulated an array of different opinions on the efficacy of displaying such powers. The *Kevaṭṭa-sutta*, *Pāṭika-sutta* and certain Buddhist monastic rules seem to denigrate their display, implying that such displays are not necessarily miracles at all. Yet, a display of superhuman power, the so-called “twin miracle” (*yamaka-pāṭihāriya*) performed by the Buddha at Śrāvastī, is included in a list of miracles that all Buddhas perform in their final lifetime.<sup>1</sup> Nor is this display an isolated exception. Instead, it seems to form a paradigm for other miraculous displays of superhuman power in South Asian Buddhist literature.

Another of the events included in the list of the Buddha’s miracles is the Buddha’s first sermon, perhaps the paradigmatic example of the Buddha teaching the Dharma. The *Kevaṭṭa-sutta* and *Pāṭika-sutta* seem to favor teaching the Dharma above the display of superhuman power and telepathic ability. Yet, as we will see in this chapter, there are further instances in which these three types of miracle are given more or less

equal weight. The Buddha uses them together or sequentially in order to generate faith in his disciples and incite them to higher levels of spiritual attainment. They are all in the Buddha's "proselytical and hortatory toolbox," so to speak, which derives from his preeminent position as "teacher of gods and men."

Many narratives seem to support a less extreme position on miraculous displays of superhuman power than that contained in the *Kevaṭṭa-sutta* and in the back story to the monastic rule prohibiting such displays. This less extreme position is similar to the one articulated by the Buddhist scholastic philosopher, Vasubandhu, in the *Abhidharmakośa*. The teaching of the Dharma remains the "best" of the three types of miracles, because it separates Buddhism from other teachings, but miraculous displays of superhuman power are still useful for the purposes of initial conversion, making people receptive to the teaching of the Dharma. On the other side of the spectrum, other narratives suggest that the Buddha is supreme simply because his superhuman powers are the greatest.

There is a spectrum of different positions on the connection between superhuman powers and miracles, and Buddhist texts can fall on various points on the spectrum. Furthermore, in still other cases, these different points of view can appear concurrently in the same narrative. Not only are the Buddha's superhuman powers greatest of all, but the Buddha also possesses true knowledge of the nature of reality, which is something that others do not possess, that is, except for those of the Buddha's disciples who have also acquired a certain level of attainment.

We also have begun to see how the Buddhist discourse on the miraculous is constituted not only by sets of interrelated concepts, but also by interrelated events that unfold in a variety of narratives. For instance, when the *Kevaṭṭa-sutta* contrasts teaching

the Dharma with displaying superhuman powers, it cannot help but call to mind narratives in which these activities take place. Similarly, when Buddhaghosa lists eight miracles that all Buddhas perform, he groups a set of narratives and illustrates how they are connected. The same is true when an anonymous artisan portrays a similar group of events on a stone bas-relief or stele that decorates a sacred Buddhist monument.

This chapter will further explore the relationship between displays of superhuman power and teaching the Dharma, looking in greater detail at a variety of narratives of the Buddha's miracles. Using these "miracle tales" as a basis for discussion, we will see how miraculous displays of superhuman power and teaching the Dharma can both be involved in the process of conversion. Superhuman powers are part of what it means to be a Buddha, and their display can have an important role in his mission.

As we proceed, however, we must continue to bear in mind that "superhuman powers," those categorized as *iddhi/ṛddhi*, are only part of what it means to be a Buddha, and Buddhist miracle tales do not always include or emphasize their display. Instead, they sometimes incorporate other marvelous and fantastic elements that establish the events they describe as miracles, which illustrate the particular holiness of the Buddha and the worthiness of his mission.

### Miracle Tales in South Asian Buddhist Literature

The term, "miracle tale," has sometimes been applied rather loosely to Buddhist narratives.<sup>2</sup> Admittedly, many Buddhist narratives feature or include miraculous displays of superhuman knowledge and power. The Buddha's "superpowers" (of memory and insight, particularly),<sup>3</sup> and those of his eminent disciples, are also an important structural

component in the narrative genres of Buddhist literature called *jātaka* and *avadāna*.<sup>4</sup> In principle, any story in which a miracle features prominently could be considered a miracle tale, but the analysis of Buddhist terminology in the first chapter yielded two prominent and overlapping “discursive strains” related to the Buddhist conception of a miracle, one involving the term, *pāṭihāriya/prātihārya*, and the other, *acchariya-abbhuta-dhamma/āścārya-adbhuta-dharma*.

The first ten stories of the *Avadāna-śataka*, which feature events that are explicitly called “miracles” (*prātihārya*), thus qualify as miracle tales. So do many more in other sections of the *Avadāna-śataka*. Some Buddhist miracle tales even refer to themselves as miracle tales, such as “The Miracle Tale” (*prātihārya-sūtra*) of the *Divyāvadāna*, which tells the story of the Buddha’s miraculous display at Śrāvastī.<sup>5</sup>

Early on, the Buddhist tradition itself seems to have isolated a group of stories and gave them the generic title, “wondrous events” (*abbhuta-dhamma*). The generic classification of wondrous events later became defunct as a literary genre, and we cannot be certain about what narratives or narrative elements it initially comprised, but there are indications that it may have included stories of certain events in the last life of the Buddha. The narratives of these events now exist in a variety of different kinds of text: sections of the *sutta* (Skt: *sūtra*) and *vinaya* collections of various Buddhist groups, independently circulating texts, the Pāli commentarial literature, etc. There is a complex story to tell about how and why Buddhist texts came to be classified differently by different groups of Buddhists over time, but we know that certain events in the life of the Buddha continued to be grouped together and reiterated in different lists. These events provide us with a set of paradigms that can be used to think about a wider range of stories.

A few Pāli *suttas* refer to specific events in the life of the Buddha, and certain qualities about the Buddha and those events, which make them “wondrous,” “amazing,” and “unprecedented.” Comparison indicates that the number of such events fluctuated, as did the specific events listed. It may be possible to see patterns in the gradual increase of such events. According to the *Acchariya-abbhuta-(dhamma)-sutta* of the *Majjhima-nikāya*, these events included the future Buddha’s conception and his birth, which the text describes as miraculous for various reasons.<sup>6</sup> The text can be read as a schematic telling of events that are described more fully in narratives of the Buddha’s conception and birth.

For instance, the text describes the following as “wondrous” and “amazing:” the fact that the Bodhisattva (i.e. the Buddha-to-be) does not touch the earth when he is born, but the four gods receive him and place him in front of his mother;<sup>7</sup> the fact that he is “pure” and “undefiled” by blood or fluids when he is born; the fact that two streams of water issue from the sky, one cool and the other warm, and cleanse the Bodhisattva and his mother;<sup>8</sup> the fact that the Bodhisattva takes seven steps and declares: “I am head of the world, I am the foremost in the world, I am eldest in the world. This is my last birth; there will not be any future rebirth;”<sup>9</sup> and the fact that radiant light and earthquakes accompany his birth. Apart from being related to the narratives, these qualities all make the point in one way or another that the Buddha is special. The Buddha himself states this fact at his birth, a variant narrative of which describes the newborn Buddha, with one hand pointing to the heavens and the other pointing to the ground, stating “On heaven and on earth, there is no one like me.”<sup>10</sup>

Apart from these and other elements related to the Buddha’s conception and birth, the short discourse adds a final “wondrous thing:” the fact that the Buddha has “feelings”

(*vedanā*) and “concepts” (*saññā*) that arise, are recognized, and pass away. This curious statement can be included among the others, because it also portrays a unique and special quality of the Buddha: the fact that he continues to think and feel even though he has overcome desire. To use Buddhist terminology, he is both mundane (*laukika*) and trans-mundane (*lokottara*). The Buddha is trans-mundane or transcendent, because he has gone beyond rebirth and suffering. To the conception and birth may be added the awakening and the first sermon, making a list of four miraculous events that is quite common in the Pāli commentarial literature.<sup>11</sup> The awakening is what makes the Buddha what he is, while the first sermon represents his mission in the world.

Although not explicitly referred to as lists of “wondrous and amazing events,” the *Mahā-parinibbāna-sutta* of the *Dīgha-nikāya* also includes two relevant lists, one citing the causes for earthquakes and another of places that “inspire awe” (*samvejanīya*) in the faithful who visit them.<sup>12</sup> Among the eight causes for earthquakes are (1) natural causes and (2) the superhuman powers of certain gods and men, but earthquakes also occur when the future Buddha (3) is conceived, (4) born, (5) achieves awakening, (6) gives the first sermon, (7) renounces his life-force, and (8) attains cessation (*nibbāna*). The four places that are said to inspire faithful Buddhists who visit them are the locations of the birth of the Buddha, his awakening, his first sermon, and his death (i.e. *nibbāna*).<sup>13</sup>

It is notable that these lists both occur in the story of the Buddha’s death or “ultimate cessation” (*parinibbāna*; *parinirvāṇa*). Thus, the lists are self-referential and serve to connect the variety of narratives in which the events occur. The list of earthquakes comes directly after the passage in which the Buddha renounces his life-force. Its presence is an explicit mark of the connection between this episode and the

wider discourse on the miraculous. Yet, even if the author had not given the list, one could discern the connections simply from reading the narrative.

If, in fact, *pāṭihāriya* and *acchariya-abbhuta-dhamma* were initially separate concepts,<sup>14</sup> and the evidence is not entirely clear that they were, we have seen that they came to be used synonymously at some point. So we can again recall that among the eight “miracles” (*pāṭihāriya*) that Buddhaghosa lists in the commentary to the *Dīghanikāya* are the six events listed above, numbers three through eight of the list of causes for earthquakes, and two others: the miracles of Śrāvastī and Sāṅkāśya.<sup>15</sup> Buddhaghosa refers to the miracle of Śrāvastī as “the twin miracle” (*yamaka-pāṭihāriya*), in reference to one of the more famous miracles that the Buddha performed on the occasion.<sup>16</sup> The miracle of Sāṅkāśya he calls “the descent from the heavens” (*devorohaṇa*).

The *Mahāvibhāṣā*, originally written in an Indic language, perhaps around in the 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries of the Common Era, but now extant only in Chinese translation, contains a list of six important places.<sup>17</sup> They are the four listed in the *Mahā-parinibbāna-sutta* as places that faithful Buddhists ought to visit, as well as Śrāvastī, where the Buddha performed the great miracle, and Sāṅkāśya, where he descended from the heaven of the Thirty-three. Faxian, the Chinese pilgrim who traveled in India and Sri Lanka during the late 4<sup>th</sup> and early 5<sup>th</sup> centuries, gives two relevant lists. At one point, he lists four unnamed locations as places where Buddhas always perform certain acts. They are the places where the Buddha achieves awakening, teaches the first sermon, defeats the rival teachers (i.e. the Śrāvastī miracles?), and descends from the heaven of the Thirty-three. Later, he lists four “great stūpas” located at the places where the Buddha was born, where he achieved awakening, where he taught the first sermon, and where he attained *nirvāna*, reiterating a list also found in the *Mahā-parinibbāna-sutta*.<sup>18</sup>



Two, four, six, and eight, various sources indicate some of the trends at work in the gradual expansion of events included in these various lists. Some of the same events are contained in five-fold and ten-fold lists of “deeds that [all Buddhas] invariably perform” (*avaśya-karanīya*),<sup>19</sup> and the Tibetan tradition supplies twelve significant “deeds” (*mdzad pa*) in the life of the Buddha.<sup>20</sup> In addition to these textual sources, an equally important source of information on the classification of significant events in the life of the Buddha is the archeological record. Some of these numbers and many of the same events are depicted on bas-reliefs and steles that once decorated sacred Buddhist monuments of the Indian subcontinent.<sup>21</sup>

The presence of these many and varied lists suggests different groupings of narratives and narrative events that can provide a paradigm for thinking about the nature of the miracle in Buddhist literature. These lists may also be used as a yardstick for assessing the significance of other events, as King Milinda does in the *Milinda-pañha* when he asks Nāgasena why earthquakes accompanied Vessantara’s act of giving when the Buddha lists only eight causes of earthquakes in the *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta*.<sup>22</sup> Nāgasena replies that the earthquakes on that occasion were “exceptional,” but for our purposes it is important simply to recognize that these lists do not comprise the total number of miracles or miracle tales in Buddhist literature. They suggest some of the conventional characteristics of the genre, and indicate some of the ways that Buddhists conceptualized the general nature of the miracle.

Comparing these lists with one another can narrow the focus even further. For instance, while *pāṭihāriya* is found as a synonym for *acchāriya-abbhuta-dhamma*, it also occurs in the three-fold classification of types of miraculous display, a classification that invariably includes displays of superhuman power and teaching the Dharma. It bears

repeating for the sake of emphasis that when a text like the *Kevaṭṭa-sutta* contrasts the different types of miracle, it cannot help but bring to mind narratives in which these events occur.

As mentioned above, the Buddha's first sermon is arguably the paradigm for the teaching of the Dharma. One of the best known versions of the event occurs as an episode in a longer narrative sequence that begins just after the Buddha's awakening and concludes with the conversion of the Buddha's preeminent disciples, thus forming a basis for the establishment of the Buddhist community.<sup>23</sup> The miracles at Śrāvastī (and Sāṅkāśya) arguably provide the narrative paradigm for the miraculous display of superhuman power. This accounts, perhaps, for their inclusion in lists of four, five, six, eight, or ten significant deeds in the Buddha's life.

In the next section, we will look in detail at the language used to describe the early conversions, comparing the Buddha's first sermon with the conversion of the three Kāśyapa brothers, events that both occur in a narrative sequence of events after the Buddha has achieved awakening. We will compare these miracles stories with a number of different versions of the miracles at Śrāvastī. As we will see, there are thematic as well as narrative connections that can be made between the awakening, the first sermon, and the miracles at Śrāvastī and Sāṅkāśya. Different versions offer different interpretations, allowing us to view the same event from different perspectives. All these miracles generate faith and trust in Buddhism in those who witness them. Conversely, they establish the holiness and power of the Buddha and the religious significance of his mission.

### Three Types of Miracle in Narrative Form

In the *Kevaṭṭa-sutta*, the Buddha claims that miraculous displays of superhuman power and telepathic ability are problematic, because although they impress the faithful, skeptics can find other explanations. For one thing, the argument runs, superhuman powers and telepathy could be mere magical tricks. The true miracle is the Buddha's ability to teach the Dharma. While this line of argument suggests one way of distinguishing the uniqueness and supremacy of the Buddha, the *Kevaṭṭa-sutta* also seems to say that displays of superhuman power and telepathic ability are not effective means of conversion.

We have seen that Buddhist texts are far from unanimous on this point. For instance, Vasubandhu, who agrees that teaching the Dharma is the best type of miracle, seems to accept the idea that miraculous displays of superhuman power are effective for conversion. Vasubandhu is supported by numerous examples throughout Buddhist literature where displays of superhuman powers seem to be effective means of generating faith in those who observe them.

Moreover, it is always possible that one might react skeptically to the Buddha's claim of authority. The *Mahāvagga* of the Pali *Vinaya* tells the well-known story that, after the Buddha first achieved awakening, he met an Ājīvaka named Upaka on the road to Benares. The Ājīvakas were in some ways the most skeptical of ascetics in ancient India, for unlike most ascetics, they allegedly denied even the efficacy of action (*karma*).<sup>24</sup> When he meets the Buddha, however, Upaka notices his radiant complexion and calm expression, and asks him who he is and which teacher he follows. The Buddha replies that he follows no teacher, that he is an Arhant, a fully awakened Buddha, to

which the Ājīvaka responds, “Maybe so, friend,” and walks away.<sup>25</sup> Despite his impression that the Buddha might be a holy person, Upaka does not seem particularly impressed by the Buddha’s claims to superiority and unique holiness.

Are there, however, more specific examples that might lend further support for the reasoning given in the *Kevalā-sutta*? In other words, are there instances in which marvelous displays of superhuman power or telepathic ability are clearly ineffective means of converting others? The fact is that examples are few and far between. One possibility that we have already seen is the *Pāṭika-sutta*. There, the Buddha’s miracles are unable to prevent Sunakkhatta from leaving the Buddhist fold. However, on the other hand, the Buddha’s story seems to do enough to generate or at least reinforce the faith of the wandering ascetic, Bhaggavagotta, to whom the Buddha relates the story.<sup>26</sup> Thus, the *Pāṭika-sutta* would seem to support the line of reasoning that miraculous displays of superhuman power impress those already possessing a degree of faith, but fail to convince those who are inclined to skepticism.

Another possible example is the so-called “thaumaturgical impasse” at Urubilvā (P: Uruvelā). Like that of the *Pāṭika-sutta*, however, it is not a straightforward example. The episode in question is found in the narrative sequence of events occurring after the Buddha’s awakening. What follows the Buddha’s enlightenment is a series of events, including (importantly) the first sermon, which tell the story of how the Buddha establishes his ministry and wins his first disciples. Thus, it is the story of the newly minted Buddha trying out his newly acquired powers.

One episode in this narrative sequence is the Buddha’s encounter with Upaka. Not all of the Buddha’s early encounters turn out unsuccessfully, however. For the Buddha soon preaches the first sermon and converts his former companions, the five ascetics who

deserted him for giving up the path of severe asceticism. Later, the Buddha is successful in converting the Kāśyapa brothers, three ascetics with one thousand followers between them, led by the eldest brother, Urubilvā Kāśyapa. The Buddha's methods of converting the Kāśyapa brothers are what concern us here.

Several versions of the story have come down to us, and they do not all agree. The disagreements among them are particularly instructive, however, and will be useful to our purposes. Not only do they help us to see the complexities involved in the question of how conversions are accomplished in Buddhist literature, but they also shed some much needed light on the rather confusing categorization of the three types of miraculous display. In particular, they may help us to see how the display of telepathic ability became a separate type of miracle from the other two. In addition, the episode of the conversion of the three Kāśyapa brothers, along with other miraculous events, helps to demonstrate our central contention that the three types of miraculous display were often used in combination to achieve the proselytizing and hortatory purposes of the miracle.

The basic story of the impasse at Urubilvā, as it appears in the *Mahāvagga* of the Pāli *Vinaya*, and in the *Vinayas* of other early Buddhist schools, is as follows.<sup>27</sup> In his attempt to convert Kāśyapa, the Buddha performs many displays of superhuman power. Yet, after these many displays of superhuman power, Kāśyapa remains unconverted. After the performance of each miracle, which, the *Mahāvagga* suggests, numbered 3,500 in total,<sup>28</sup> Kāśyapa thinks to himself, “Certainly, the great ascetic possesses great superhuman power (*mahā-iddhika*), great, wondrous presence (*mahā-anubhāva*)...but he is no saint (*arahant*) like I am.”<sup>29</sup> Thus, the Buddha and Kāśyapa reach an impasse. The Buddha has displayed various and sundry superhuman powers, while Kāśyapa remains

unconverted. The point thus far appears to be that displays of superhuman power are insufficient to establish the superiority of the Buddha and convert the rival ascetic.

Interestingly, however, the first of the Buddha's extraordinary feats, and by all accounts the one most closely associated with the occasion, sufficiently impresses Kāśyapa that he invites the Buddha to stay with him and agrees to provide him with food. For his first miracle, the Buddha initially asks to spend a night in Kāśyapa's fire-lodge, a dwelling used by the ascetics for the purpose of conducting the fire sacrifice (or exposing themselves to extreme heat). Kāśyapa is reluctant to allow it, because a fierce fire-breathing snake also lives in the fire-lodge, and he is concerned the Buddha might be hurt. The Buddha insists, however, and Kāśyapa finally agrees.

So, the Buddha spends the night in the fire-lodge and succeeds in taming the fire-breathing serpent, for the Buddha also is master of the element of fire. The snake and the Buddha engage in a duel of fire, with the snake breathing smoke and fire and the Buddha emitting flames from his body, until finally the snake is subdued. The next morning, the Buddha emerges from the fire-hut with the serpent coiled up in his alms bowl.<sup>30</sup>

The language used in the *Mahāvagga* to describe Kāśyapa's reaction to this first miracle is important. He becomes "serene" (*abhippasanna*) "as a result of this miraculous display of superhuman power" (*iminā iddhipāṭihāriyena*), and invites the Buddha to stay. One might say that he becomes receptive to faith. The term I have translated as serene is merely an adjectival form of the same term I have been translating as faith, *pasāda* in Pāli or *prasāda* in Sanskrit. *Prasāda* is a complex concept without a simple equivalent in English. It means faith and trust, but also beauty, serenity, as when the mind is unclouded and free of doubt. It also means receptivity to faith, as characterized by awe and veneration. The literal meaning of the term, *prasanna*, "settled," also evokes a sense of

purity. When dirty water has been allowed to sit and the sediment has sunk to the bottom, the clear water that remains is *prasanna*.

In any case, only the Pāli version contains this description of Kāśyapa's reaction. Curiously, the entire episode of the taming of the snake is told twice in the Pāli, first in prose and then again in verse. In the prose version, as in the versions that are found in the *Vinayas* of other early schools, Kāśyapa's reaction is skeptical, just as I described it above. The Buddha may have power, Kāśyapa thinks, but he is not my equal, or alternatively, he is merely my equal. Only the sentence that concludes the versified version, which occurs only in the Pāli, describes Kāśyapa as serene as a result of the miraculous display of superpower.

Has Kāśyapa already been converted by the snake-taming miracle? Most of the versions do not contain the passage, and suggest, on the contrary, that Kāśyapa's conversion occurs only after a series of displays of the Buddha's superpowers are unsuccessful in doing so. In the Pāli version as well the formal conversion happens later. This makes the presence of the statement that Kāśyapa became serene as a result of the snake-taming miracle slightly irregular, though it makes sense as the reason that Kāśyapa asks the Buddha to stay with him. The term, *abhippasanna*, could be used in the Pāli version in a rather non-technical sense. It may simply be trying to say that Kāśyapa is pleased with the Buddha's performance, but it also reflects that fact that Kāśyapa is becoming receptive to faith. In a sense, this miraculous display of superhuman powers does what Vasubandhu suggests that such displays do. It makes an initial impression that leads to Kāśyapa's conversion.

Another possibility is that the Pāli editor is trying to accommodate an alternate version of the story, which would account for the presence of differing verse and prose

version of the miraculous taming of the fire-breathing snake. Alternate versions of the story did exist, as testified by a version of the story in the *Mahāvastu*, a text that scholars suspect was once part of the *Vinaya* of a subgroup of the Mahāsāṅghikas. In the *Mahāvastu*, Kāśyapa, his brothers, and their disciples are all converted by the Buddha's superhuman power when he tames the fire-breathing snake. The incident comes not at the beginning, but as the climax of the Buddha's miracles. Before looking at the *Mahāvastu*'s version of these events in greater detail, however, let us return to the story of Kāśyapa's conversion as it appears in the Pāli and other *Vinaya* collections.

As stated above, in most versions of the story, the Buddha performs various and sundry miracles with his superhuman power, while Kāśyapa remains unmoved. They reach an impasse, apparently suggesting that displays of superhuman power are ineffective means of conversion. While it might seem more to the point if Kāśyapa were never converted, this is not what happens. In each and every version, Kāśyapa, his brothers, and their disciples are eventually converted. If not by means of the Buddha's superhuman powers, then how, one might ask, is this conversion accomplished?

In the Pāli *Mahāvagga*, the Buddha uses his telepathic powers, becomes aware of Kāśyapa's thoughts, and determines that "the confused man will continue to think thus for a long time." Thus, the Buddha decides to "shock" (*samvejayyan*) him. He says to Kāśyapa: "You are not a saint, Kāśyapa, nor have you attained the path to sainthood. The path you walk will not lead you to become a saint, nor will it lead you to the path to sainthood."<sup>31</sup> Remarkably, this statement has the desired effect, and Kāśyapa suddenly, inexplicably, decides to convert.

Other versions describe Kāśyapa's conversion with slight differences. In the *Vinaya* of the Mahīśāsakas, for instance, the Buddha contradicts Kāśyapa while levitating



in the air.<sup>32</sup> If the point were to emphasize the ineffectiveness of superhuman powers, then this would seem decidedly odd. Other versions explain the conversion by putting emphasis on Kāśyapa's recognition of the Buddha's ability to read his mind. In the *Catuṣpariṣat-sūtra*, for instance, although no reference is made to the Buddha's intentions, once the Buddha has contradicted him outright, Kāśyapa himself thinks, "The great ascetic knows my mind with his mind!"<sup>33</sup> Thus, it makes clear that the Buddha has demonstrated his ability to read the other's mind, and, as a result of his recognition of this ability, Kāśyapa decides to become a disciple of the Buddha.<sup>34</sup>

The Dharmaguptaka *Vinaya* is perhaps clearest in this regard, for it explicitly states not only that the Buddha has read Kāśyapa's mind, but describes Kāśyapa's reaction in unambiguous terms:

This great ascetic possesses "great supernatural power" (*mahārddhika?*) because he knows what I think in my mind. This great ascetic, having mastered the great "bases of supernatural power" (*ṛddhipāda*), has become a saint. It would be better for me now to follow him and cultivate the pure path.<sup>35</sup>

In all versions of Kāśyapa's conversion, we find references to the Buddha's telepathic ability. Among the various explanations of Kāśyapa's conversion, the most ambiguous is perhaps the Pāli, though it, too, suggests that the Buddha knew what was in Kāśyapa's mind and intended to shock him with it. The concept of *saṃvega*, which can denote shock, awe, and the like, is one that we have already seen in the context of the four places that inspire faithful Buddhists with awe. Thus, the notion fits well with others that describe emotional and cognitive reactions to miracles.<sup>36</sup>

Though the Pāli version of the conversion of the Kāśyapa brothers does not make any explicit reference to the three types of miracle, the story includes displays of superhuman power, telepathic ability and teaching the Dharma. They seem to be different

components used in the process of conversion. First, the Buddha employs his superhuman powers, then he uses his telepathic ability, and finally, he teaches the Dharma to the three Kāśyapa brothers. Apart from the Pāli and the *Mahāvastu* versions, other versions of the story make explicit reference to the three types of miraculous display. In fairly stark contrast to the differing valuations placed on the three types of miracle in the *Kevaṭṭa-sutta*, references to them in the different versions of the conversion of the Kāśyapa brothers appear to give the three types of miracle more or less equal weight. One gets the sense that the categorization of miracles is an attempt to account more or less formally for the different components involved in the complexity of the conversion process.

After the Buddha has accepted Urubilvā Kāśyapa's request for ordination, along with that of his two brothers and their one thousand followers, the Buddha and the thousand monks stay together in Gayā. During this point, the Buddha preaches to them what has become known as "the fire sermon" (P: *āditta-pariyāya*). The theme of fire is an important one in the story of the Kāśyapa brothers. Not only did the Kāśyapa brothers, before their conversion, make fire sacrifices. The Buddha also chooses to impress Urubilvā Kāśyapa by taming his fire-breathing snake, and he does so by relying on his own mastery of fire.

Finally, he returns to the theme of fire in the fire sermon, expressing the teaching that "everything is on fire" (P: *sabbaṃ ādittaṃ*). Here burning is made into a simile for the fact that all conditioned things are conjoined with passion, hatred, and confusion, the three root afflictions. However, the specifics of the sermon are less directly relevant to our current discussion than the fact that the Buddha taught his new recruits the doctrine. In the Pāli version, the Buddha merely teaches them the fire sermon, but other versions of the story frame this teaching in terms of the three types of marvelous display.

The Mahīśāsaka *Vinaya* does not refer specifically to three types of “miraculous display,” but instead states that the Buddha taught the Kāśyapas and their followers “by utilizing three subjects of teaching:” 1) “the teaching concerning the ‘bases of supernatural power’ (*rddhipāda*),” 2) “the teaching concerning the teaching of the dharma (*dharmadesanā*),” and 3) “the teaching concerning instructions and orders.”<sup>37</sup> Here we have an iteration of an alternate listing of the three types, which are here simply called three subjects of teaching.

One wonders whether the original text had *pāṭihāriya* or something else entirely. In any case, the second of the three types appears as “teaching the Dharma” (*dharmadesanā*), just as it does in another iteration of this alternative list found in the *Mahāvastu*. Interestingly, the language used here to describe the “teaching the Dharma” is equivalent to the explanation of “the miracle of instruction [in the Dharma]” (*anusāsani-pāṭihāriya*), the third member of the three-fold list contained in the *Kevaṭṭa-sutta*. In this version, the fire sermon is categorized as “the teaching concerning instructions and orders.”

In its version of events, the Dharmaguptaka *Vinaya* says,

[The Buddha] instructed and converted the community of one thousand monks with the help of three things: 1) the instruction and conversion related to the bases of supernatural power, 2) the instruction and conversion related to memory (*anusmṛti*), and 3) the instruction and conversion related to the teaching of the doctrine.<sup>38</sup>

The Chinese translation (seen through the French) gives an apt description of the basic components of the concept of the Buddhist miracle: conversion and instruction. As above, the fire sermon is given as the example of the third type of miracle, which appears unambiguously to be called the miracle of teaching the Dharma, though what the underlying Indic language version might have read is unclear.

In addition to clarifying the relationship between the three types of miraculous display, the different versions of the Kāśyapa brothers' conversion shed some light on another perplexing question that is related to categorization of the three types of miraculous display. Why is the display of telepathic ability listed as a separate type of miracle? The theme of telepathic ability seems to hold a particularly important place in all the versions of the tale, featuring even in the *Mahāvastu*. Its separate and distinct importance in the stories may suggest one reason that telepathic ability was distinguished from superhuman powers and the ability to teach the Dharma in the three-fold list.

In order to understand how this is the case, one must first understand that the use of the word, *ādesanā* or *ādeśanā*, in the second of the three types of miraculous display has an ambiguous meaning. The *Kevaṭṭa-sutta* and the Pāli commentarial tradition suggest that it refers to the Buddha's ability to perceive the thoughts in others' minds, but the we have seen above that texts of other traditions sometimes offer *dharma-deśanā* or teaching the Dharma, as a variant reading of the second type of miracle.<sup>39</sup> *Ādeśanā* in the sense of a mental capability of "pointing out" or "guessing" is rather uncommon, but *deśanā* in the sense of *dharma-deśanā*, "teaching the Dharma," is fairly commonplace.

In lists of the three types of miracle, it would seem that *ādesanā* or *ādeśanā* is more common than *dharma-deśanā*, but the presence of the variant reading raises a question about the general understanding of the second type of miracle. If the second type of miracle refers to teaching the Dharma, then the meaning of the third type of miraculous display, *anuśāsanī*, which also means instruction, becomes somewhat redundant.

In the description of the three types of miracles in the Dharmaguptaka *Vinaya* version of events, the description of the second of the three miracles seems to have

something to do with an ability of mind. Bareau translates it as memory and supplies the Sanskrit term, *anusmṛti*, “recollection,” but the explanation of this second type of miracle is nearly identical with the explanations of teaching the Dharma found in the Mahīśāsaka *Vinaya* and the *Kevaṭṭa-sutta*.<sup>40</sup>

Like the Dharmaguptaka *Vinaya*, the *Catuṣpariṣat-sūtra* and the Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya* state that the Buddha “exhorted” (Skt: *avavadati*; Tib: ‘*doms par mdzad*) the monks with the three types of “miracle” (Skt: *prātihārya*, Tib: *rdzu ‘phrul, cho ‘phrul*). The reading of the Sanskrit is incomplete at places, but the Tibetan suggests that the second of the three types of miracle probably read *ādeśanā-prātihārya* (Tib: *kun brjod pa’i cho ‘phrul*). The Tibetan term is sometimes explicitly connected with mental capability in Tibetan translations. Like the others, the third miracle is exemplified by the fire sermon, but an interesting variation occurs in the explanation of the second type of miracle. It includes, *as one single passage*, a slightly condensed version of the explanations of *both* the second *and* the third types of miracle in the *Kevaṭṭa-sutta*.

Taken together, the second and third types of miracle in the *Kevaṭṭa-sutta* (or just the second type in the *Catuṣpariṣat-sūtra* and Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya*) can be interpreted as two aspects of the same type of event. Here is passage from the *Catuṣpariṣat-sūtra*, restored with the help of the Tibetan translation of the Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya*, followed by the full, connected passage from the *Kevaṭṭa-sutta*:

[Cps]: Monks, this is your mind (*cittam*). This is [your] mind (*manas*). This is [your] consciousness (*vijñānam*). Consider (*vitarkayata*) this. Don’t consider that. Think about (*manasikuruta*) this. Don’t think about that. Abandon (*prajahata*) this. Don’t abandon that. Having taken up (*upasampadya*) this and realized [it] directly with the body, practice it.<sup>41</sup>

[*Kevaṭṭa-sutta*]: This, Kevaṭṭa, [is the miracle of mind-reading ability.] A monk points out (*ādisati*) the very mind (*cittaṃ pi*) of another being, another person. He points out the very mental state (*cetasikaṃ pi*). He points out their precise initial [and] continuing thought processes (*vitakkaṃ pi ādisati; vicāritaṃ pi ādisati*). [And he says,] “This is in your mind (*cittaṃ*). This is your mind (*mano*). Your mind is here. [Here the explanation of “mind-reading” (*ādesanā*) ends. What follows is the explanation of instruction (*anusāsani*).] Consider (*vittakketha*) this. Don’t consider that. Think (*manasikarotha*) this way. Don’t think that way. Renounce (*pajahatha*) this. Having taken up this (*idam upasampajja*), practice [it].”<sup>42</sup>

The parallel phraseology of these passages is striking, but note also how they seem to map well onto the descriptions of Urubilvā Kāśyapa’s conversion. The Buddha states precisely what is in Kāśyapa’s mind, and while he does not explicitly exhort him to take up the path, Kāśyapa’s response functions as a self-admonition. Kāśyapa exhorts himself to give up his ascetic practices and fire sacrifices, and to take up vows and precepts, or in other words, to become a disciple of the Buddha.

While the *Kevaṭṭa-sutta* seems to contrast superhuman powers (and, we ought to recall, telepathic ability) with teaching the Dharma, and values the latter above the former, several versions of the story of Urubilvā Kāśyapa’s conversion suggest that the three types of miracle can be given equal weight. Indeed, they can function together or sequentially in the unfolding of a miraculous event. Moreover, there seems to be enough similarity between the Kāśyapa’s conversion and the explanations of the second and third types of miraculous display to suggest a close inter-textual relationship between the *Kevaṭṭa-sutta* and the story of Kāśyapa’s conversion. It may be that this story was instrumental in the creation of the threefold classification of miracles.

How then do superhuman powers fit into the story? As we have seen, several versions suggest that displaying his superhuman powers leads to impasse. However, the version in the Mahīśāsaka *Vinaya* depicts the Buddha breaking the impasse by stating

what is in Kāśyapa's mind while floating in the air above him. In the Dharmaguptaka *Vinaya*, telepathic ability is simply said to be part of the Buddha's superhuman power. And let us not forget the many miracles that the Buddha performs, and Kāśyapa's response to the taming of the snake in the Pāli version. Kāśyapa's response, in particular, suggests that the display of superhuman power played a necessary, though not sufficient, part in Kāśyapa's eventual conversion.

The narrative also unfolds in a sequence of miracles that parallels the invariable order of the three types of miracle. First the Buddha uses his superhuman powers, then he uses his telepathic ability, and finally he teaches the Dharma. In this case, as in other narratives, a conversion turns out to be a complex process in which different types of miracles do their work over a period of time. Their proselytizing and hortatory function can and often does involve both superhuman power and instruction in the doctrine.

Although it includes a sequence of miraculous displays of superhuman power, the *Mahāvastu* portrays the conversion of the Kāśyapa brothers in a different way from the other versions of the story. One difference has already been noted: the taming of the fire-breathing snake occurs at the end of the sequence of superhuman feats, as the climatic miracle that finally converts Kāśyapa. Second, both the Kāśyapa brothers and the Buddha use their superhuman powers. Finally, and as a result of this fact, the central conflict becomes a question of whether the Buddha's superhuman powers will prove greater than those of the Kāśyapa brothers.

The story begins with the Buddha, who reads the minds of Kāśyapa and the other ascetics, and determines that they are too intent upon themselves and their own level of attainment. They mistakenly believe themselves to be saints. So, in order to give them something else to think about, the Buddha disguises himself as an ascetic and conjures

one thousand faithful, comely ascetics out of thin air and flies off with them to see Kāśyapa. When Kāśyapa sees them coming, he grimaces with concern and thinks,

Here comes another teacher with ‘great superhuman power’ (*maharddhika*), ‘great, wondrous presence’ (*mahānubhāva*), followed of one thousand serene and comely ascetics. My own followers, those devoted (*abhiprasanna*) to me, will surely see him and abandon me!

Kāśyapa is concerned that perhaps this rival ascetic is equal to him. The Buddha reads Kāśyapa’s thoughts, immediately doffs his disguise and makes the thousand ascetics disappear.

Thus, the Buddha comes to stand before Kāśyapa and his followers in his full, radiant glory, which the text describes at length. Seeing him, Kāśyapa and the other ascetics are “astounded” (*vismita*), but still Kāśyapa says, “This ascetic, Gautama, has great superhuman power [and] great wondrous presence, but my superhuman powers are greater [than his] (*aham punar maharddhikatara*).”<sup>43</sup> When one compares this statement with the similar statements in other versions of the story, superhuman power replaces generalized sainthood (P: *arhatta*; Skt: *arhattva*) as the basis for comparing himself with the Buddha.

What follows is a series of miracles in which the Buddha plays with his telepathic ability and superhuman powers. Kāśyapa thinks to himself, “I wish the Buddha would leave.” The Buddha reads his mind, and immediately flies away. Yet, the Buddha’s previous miracle has had an effect, and Kāśyapa’s followers begin to renounce their ascetic life-style. So, Kāśyapa wishes the Buddha would return for a meal in order to win them back. The Buddha reads his mind again and flies back to the hermitage. Following these events, Kāśyapa and his followers again reflect: “Since he knows the mind of other



beings, other people, with [his] mind, the ascetic Gautama has great superhuman powers and great, wondrous presence, but our superhuman powers are greater.”<sup>44</sup>

A sequence of superhuman displays follow, but Kāśyapa and the other ascetics fail to be dissuaded from thinking their own powers to be greater. The specific nature of these miracles is interesting, however. First, Kāśyapa and his followers hover in the air preparing to perform fire sacrifices, but cannot light the fire. They think to themselves, “Whose power prevents the fire from burning? It must be the powerful, wondrous presence (*anubhāva*) of the ascetic Gautama, for he possesses great superhuman power and great wondrous presence.” At this point, the fire catches, but still the ascetics say that their superhuman powers are greater.

The same thing occurs again and again. The ascetics are unable to come back to earth. They are unable to fetch water, prepare food or chop firewood. They are unable to perform these tasks until they acknowledge the power of the Buddha that restricts them. 500 miracles later, the climax is reached. The Buddha spends the night in the fire-hut and tames the fire-breathing snake with a marvelous display of his power over fire. At which point, the Kāśyapa brothers are “mastered” (*paryādinna*). In a final creative twist, the tamed snake then transforms itself into a man and takes refuge in the Buddha, as well.

Although telepathy and various types of superhuman powers are on display in the *Mahāvastu*’s version of events, there is no reference to teaching the Dharma or the three types of miracle. Though the theme of fire is emphasized, the fire sermon does not occur. From the point of view of rhetoric, the story still argues that the Buddha is superior to the ascetics, but the reason here seems to be that his superhuman powers are greater than theirs. Miracle tales attempt to demonstrate the rhetorical argument that the Buddha is

supreme, but they can achieve this in different ways depending, for instance, on how the miracles are portrayed.

Among the different versions of the story of the conversion of the three Kāśyapa brothers, the *Mahāvastu* seems to emphasize the Buddha's superhuman powers more straightforwardly than do the others, which seem to present a more complex and ambiguous portrayal of the Buddha's superhuman powers in relation to his other proselytizing techniques. In all these versions, however, the miracles function to convert the Kāśyapa brothers by demonstrating, in one way or another, the superiority of the Buddha. In this section, focusing on the versions of the Kāśyapa brothers, we have seen two methods of establishing this preeminence, one based on showing that the superhuman powers of the Buddha are simply greater than those of the rivals, the other based a subtler and seemingly more complex process utilizing the threefold categorization of miracles.

The next section further develops the argument that displays of superhuman power and teaching the Dharma can be viewed as equally miraculous events by looking at the common themes of conflict and motive in the narratives of the Buddha's miracles, particularly the early conversions and the miracle of Śrāvastī. It is significant that the early conversions, such as the conversion of the Kāśyapa brothers and the first sermon, most often occur in continuous narratives that tell the story of the Buddha's early ministry. These events can be compared to several of the different versions of the miracles at Śrāvastī, furthering the case that "miracle tales" are part of a common discourse in which miracles carry a significance consonant with the Buddha's mission to lead beings to awakening and freedom from rebirth and suffering.

## Conflicts and Motivations

The stories of the conversion of the Kāśyapa brothers can be usefully compared with the different versions of the miracles at Śrāvastī (and Sāṅkāśya) in several ways. For one thing, the latter emphasize the efficacy of superhuman power, but in a complex way that does not diminish or eliminate the significance of teaching the Dharma. However, the similarities between these stories or groups of stories begin at the level of plot. As in the story of the three Kāśyapa brothers, competition between the Buddha and various rival teachers—for prestige, devotees and material support—is one of the main narrative themes of the story of the miracles at Śrāvastī.

Competition is an implicit theme in all versions of the story of the conversion of the Kāśyapas, but perhaps most clearly emerges in the *Mahāvastu* version, which describes the initial response of Urubilvā Kāśyapa to the Buddha's fabulous entrance with his one thousand conjured ascetics in tow in the story of the miracles at Śrāvastī. The issue of competition for material support is forefront in the minds of the six rival teachers when they challenge the Buddha to a contest. In fact, some versions of the story narrate opening scenes that clarify this theme by exploring the source of the rival teachers' anger and frustration at the superhuman power of the Buddha.

Quite interestingly, these opening scenes bear striking resemblances to the *Mahāvastu*'s version of the conversion of the Kāśyapa brothers, especially in the type of miracles that the Buddha initially performs. These miracles emphasize in a creative and humorous way the superiority of the Buddha's superhuman power. In the *Dharmaguptaka Vinaya* version,<sup>45</sup> for instance, a wealthy householder from Rājagṛha tries to make offerings of various kinds to the rival ascetics, but having put his hand in the flower-jar,

he is unable to remove it, due to the superhuman power of the Buddha. Only when he tries to make offerings to the Buddha is he able to do so.

Having realized the Buddha's power, the householder invites him and his monks for a meal. The next day, the Buddha and 1,250 of his monks arrive with an entourage of gods who shower their path with flowers and play heavenly theme music.<sup>46</sup> When the rival ascetics arrive to crash the party, the householder wants to deny them entry, because his house is not large enough and he has prepared only enough food for the Buddha and his monks. The Buddha overrules him, however, and uses his superhuman power to expand the dimensions of the room and create hundreds of thousands of chairs for the ascetics, a miracle reminiscent of the miracle of the chairs in the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*. Needless to say, the Buddha also makes certain there is enough food for everyone. After the meal, the Buddha preaches the Dharma for the householder and leaves with his monks. Then, the ascetics go to the king and challenge the Buddha to a wonderworking contest.

Given what has just occurred, it is hard to see why the ascetics would want to challenge the Buddha, and the Dharmaguptaka *Vinaya* gives no clear explanation. Instead, the whole episode seems rather poorly connected to the rest of the narrative. We seem to be dealing with a variety of narrative components used bric-a-brac to create the conflict at the heart of the story. The presence of this opening section is made still odder by the fact that the Dharmaguptaka *Vinaya* also includes a version of the story of Piṇḍola Bhāradvāja's marvelous display, which also opens the *Dhammapada* commentary version of the story of the Śrāvastī miracles. Thus, in a sense, the Dharmaguptaka *Vinaya* version contains two framing stories, possibly because it preserves or combines two narrative traditions.

Among the different versions of the Śrāvastī miracles, it is striking that stories in which Māra features as the instigator of the rival ascetics' challenge never begin with the story of Piṇḍola Bhāradvāja. Perhaps because they therefore lack this framing story, they incorporate the Buddha's prohibition on displays of superhuman power in a different way. Another version of the story, which is found in the "Sūtra of the Wise and the Fool,"<sup>47</sup> possesses characteristics of the Dharmaguptaka *Vinaya* version, but also shares a number of similarities with narrative traditions on which the Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya* version is based. For one thing, it eliminates the story of Piṇḍola Bhāradvāja, and incorporates Māra into the story. By altering the narrative in this way, it provides a clearer explanation of the rival teachers' motivations.

In this version, King Bimbisāra, a famous devotee of the Buddha, orders his younger brother, who had been venerating the rival ascetics, to host a meal for the Buddha. So as not to offend his own teachers, the king's brother makes an open invitation to all, but does not initially send a person specifically to invite the Buddha. Therefore, the ascetics, who had been specially invited, arrive first and take the highest seats as a symbol of their purported status. When the Buddha finally arrives with his disciples, his seat miraculously elevates above those of the ascetics. Try as they might, the ascetics are unable to position their seats above the Buddha's.

When the servers bring water for washing hands, they come first to the highest seat, but the Buddha defers to the rival teachers. In a possible nod to the Dharmaguptaka *Vinaya* version, however, the pitcher won't pour water until the Buddha has first been served. The same thing occurs with the blessing. The Buddha defers, but when the ascetics open their mouths, no sound comes out. They are forced to point at the Buddha,

who delivers the blessing. The same thing occurs with the serving of the food, and again with the preaching of the Dharma after the meal.

Afterwards, the ascetics are filled with anger and embarrassment, and go off by themselves to perfect their own superhuman powers. Māra becomes concerned that they will not be able to spread their false teachings, and so he uses his own powers to deceive them into thinking that they, too, possess such powers. In this way, this version not only provides a detailed episode to explain the rival ascetics anger and jealousy, but also clarifies Māra's motivation for instigating the affair, neither of which is clearly articulated in the *Divyāvadāna* or *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya*.

Thus, both the story of the conversion of the Kāśyapa brothers and the story of the miracles at Śrāvastī are rooted in the theme of conflict and competition between rival teachers for devotees and material support. Secondly, in some versions of the Śrāvastī miracles, the wonderworking contest is driven by the cosmic conflict between Māra and the Buddha that is reiterated in other significant events in the Buddha's life, such as the awakening and the renunciation of his life.

Unlike the three Kāśyapa brothers, however, the six rival ascetics are never successfully converted in the story of the miracles at Śrāvastī. They are fabulously defeated instead. The two stories approach the conflict from different perspectives, a fact that is reflected in the issue of who takes the initiative. In the story of the Kāśyapa brothers, the Buddha instigates the affair in order to convert the rival ascetics. In the story of the Śrāvastī miracles, however, the rival ascetics challenge the Buddha, either on their own or through Māra's deception. Thus, the story emphasizes the theme of defeat at least as much as conversion. While many beings are converted, two of the most common narrative elements in the various versions of the story are the gods' destruction of the

rival teachers' thrones and the suicide of the fleeing ascetic, Pūraṇa Kāśyapa. The wondrous manner of the Buddha's victory results in many conversions, but the theme of defeat can be read to imply that the Buddha was somehow unsuccessful insofar as he is unable to convert the rival ascetics. Despite the fact that both conversion and defeat reflect upon the rhetoric of the Buddha's supremacy, some versions seem to emphasize conversion and deemphasize defeat.

In any case, the story of the miracles at Śrāvastī possesses another important source of tension that the story of the three Kāśyapa brothers does not. This comes from the references in the former to the monastic rule prohibiting monks from displaying their superhuman powers. Different versions of the story integrate this theme in different ways. Sometimes, it is a factor in the decision-making process of the six rival teachers. For instance, we have seen that the *Dhammapada* commentary and Dharmaguptaka *Vinaya* begin their versions of the story with a retelling of Piṇḍola Bhāradvāja's miraculous display, which forms the basis for the Buddha's subsequent prohibition on such displays. The prohibition then factors into the rival teachers' decision to challenge the Buddha to a wonderworking contest.

In other versions, the Buddha's prohibition is given as the reason for his initial refusal to participate. In the *Divyāvadāna*, when King Prasenajit approaches the Buddha and relays the challenge of the rival ascetics, the Buddha initially responds,

Great King, I don't teach the Dharma to the disciples by saying, "Go, monks, and display miracles of superhuman power (*rddhi-prātihārya*), which are feats beyond the capacity of ordinary human beings (*uttare manuṣya-dharme*), for householders and Brahmins to come [and see]." Instead, I teach the Dharma to the disciples by saying, "Live with your virtues concealed and your sins on display."<sup>48</sup>

Employing language nearly identical to what we have seen in other sources, the Buddha refers to his prohibition on miraculous displays as he attempts to put off the king's request. Though in this version the story of Piṇḍola Bhāradvāja is entirely absent, and the prohibition does not factor into the rival ascetics' motives for challenging the Buddha, it nonetheless helps to punctuate the central conflict of the story: will the Buddha accept the challenge? Will he prove his superiority?

It can be misleading to view the episode of the Kāśyapa brothers' conversion apart from the overall narrative of which it is a part. Looking at the narrative sequence as a whole, one finds a comparable source of tension earlier in the story. Will the Buddha decide to teach the Dharma or not? While it is true that the Buddha is said to have prohibited the display of superhuman power, and there is no such prohibition on teaching the Dharma, it is easy to forget that the Buddha once considered not teaching the Dharma. In a way, this puts the Buddha's first sermon and the miracles at Śrāvastī on par in terms of the tension that they can generate in the reader.

When compared with each other, statements of the Buddha's motives for preaching the Dharma evoke the same type of considerations as his statements of motive for displaying his superhuman powers in the wonderworking contest at Śrāvastī. The Buddha often seems to be portrayed above the fray. The fact that he can remain unaffected by petty rivalries and ordinary concerns contributes to the portrayal of his superiority. But if the Buddha is really above the fray, then what are his motives for performing miracles in the first place? Why become enmeshed in a world from which he has just successfully escaped? Why not follow the advice of the *Khagga-visāna-sutta*, and wander alone like the rhinoceros?



The answer rests partly with the notion that the Buddha has a mission or sacred duty to perform, and this can help us to understand better how teaching the Dharma and displaying superhuman powers are part of the same process. When the Buddha first obtains enlightenment, the *Mahāvagga* of the Pāli *Vinaya* tells us, he rests for several days enjoying the bliss of his liberation. During that time, he dwells upon the sorry state of the world, and contemplates never teaching the Dharma. He thinks, “If I teach the Dharma and others cannot understand me, I will become tired and annoyed.”<sup>49</sup> To this, the *Mahāvastu* version of these events adds the conclusion, “Therefore, let me dwell alone in silence on a mountain in the wilderness.”<sup>50</sup>

In both versions, Brahmā discerns the Buddha’s thoughts from his heavenly abode and, “as fast as a strongman might extend his bent arm or bend his extended arm,” he appears before the Buddha and implores him to teach. The Buddha is loath to accept, having already thought the matter through, and Brahmā must repeat his request a second and third time. At that point, in the *Mahāvagga*, the Buddha feels compassion and surveys the world with his Buddha-eye, perceiving the varying degrees of aptitude among the people. Although he sees that some people will not understand, he also sees some that are prepared for his teaching, and so he agrees to teach.

The *Mahāvastu*, among other texts, provides a more elaborate and slightly different account of the Buddha’s thought process, which concludes:

So, taking into consideration the group [of people whose destinies were] not [yet] fixed, perceiving that doctrines of an evil and sinful nature had arisen among the Brahmins and householders of Magadha, aware of the entreaty of mighty Brahmā, and understanding the vow that he had made seven uncountable eons ago, the Blessed One conceived great compassion for beings, and, remembering the many divine kings and lords of the world in their majesty that had come and requested him to turn the noble wheel

of the dharma, he assented to great Brahmā to turn the noble wheel of the dharma.<sup>51</sup>

In the *Mahāvastu*, the Buddha recognizes that some people, due to their bad karma, will not understand the truth, while others, due to their good karma, will perceive the truth whether it is taught to them or not. So, the Buddha focuses on those people whose destinies are not yet determined.

The recognition that false doctrines exist in the world provides a reason why the task of defeating the rival teachings and their doctrines is viewed as miraculous. The *Mahāvastu* also makes it clear that the Buddha is aware that he has a duty, which is implicit in the vow he has taken. These considerations lead him to conceive great compassion, a concept that would become ever more tightly linked to the notion of a Bodhisattva's fundamental vow as Buddhism developed. In both versions, the gods also play an active role, for they already seem to understand what the Buddha must do. Their task here is to help the Buddha to recognize his mission.

In various versions of the miracles at Śrāvastī, the Buddha makes a number of statements to explain his reasons for agreeing to participate despite his prohibition on marvelous displays of superhuman power. One explanation occurs in the *Dhammapada* commentary, where the Buddha justifies his agreement to perform the miracle with an analogy about the privileges of kingship. Just as a king ought to be able to eat mangos from his own mango grove while prohibiting others from doing so, the Buddha can perform miraculous displays of superhuman power while making a law prohibiting his monks from performing them. Here the motivation is indirectly expressed through a simile between the offices of the Buddha and the king. While the similitude between

Buddhahood and kingship is a common one, here the simile does little more than suggest that the Buddha has a right to display his powers.

In the *Divyāvadāna* and Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya*, however, the appeal is made to precedent, or perhaps to an even stronger degree of requirement that comes from the nature of things. After telling Prasenajit that he teaches his monks not to display their superhuman powers, the Buddha overrules his own prohibition by reflecting on the fact that the miracles of Śrāvastī and Sāṅkāśya are among the deeds that all Buddhas must perform (*avaśya-karaṇīya*). We can recall that there are ten such deeds listed in the *Divyāvadāna*, while the Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya* lists only five. In the Chinese *Ekottara-āgama*, a five-fold list occurs in which the only difference is that the first sermon replaces the miracle at Śrāvastī.<sup>52</sup>

The stories do not tell us precisely why these deeds are required, but they seem to fit into the cosmic pattern of the Buddha's activity, and imply the concept of duty. In agreeing to teach the Dharma, the Buddha cites compassion for beings, and the fact that false teachings had already begun to spread among the people. It is perhaps easier to understand the importance of teaching the Dharma to the Buddha's mission, but we have seen that displays of superhuman power have a role to play as well.

The *Mahāvastu* suggests another way of linking the different types of miracle to the Buddha's mission. The story of the conversion of the host of demigods (*asuras*), which bears a strong resemblance to the first ten stories of the *Avadāna-śataka*, begins with the statement:

Blessed Buddhas lead (*vinayanti*) beings by means of the three miracles, namely, the miraculous display of superhuman power (*rddhi-prātihārya*), the miracle of instruction (*anuśāsanī-prātihārya*), and the miracle of teaching the dharma (*dharmadeśanā-prātihārya*).<sup>53</sup>

While this passage offers an example of the variant enumeration of the three types of miracle, more important for the present discussion is the fact that it connects the three types of action to the concept of “leadership.” The original Pāli and Sanskrit term comes from the verb root, *nī*, “to lead,” combined with the preverb, *vi*, which in this case means “away” or “through.” In one sense, the term can be used when one leads an animal with a leash. Thus, it implies leadership and guidance, but also control, training, discipline, education, and so forth. All of these meanings are relevant to the Buddhist concept of *vinaya*, for the Buddha is the guide and leader of all beings, which he does through educating, disciplining, and training them.

At the same time, the term can also mean to remove or take away. In this sense, the Buddha teaches the dharma “in order to remove (*vinayāya*) passion (*rāga*), hatred (*dosa*) and confusion (*moha*),”<sup>54</sup> which are known as the three primary “impurities” (P, *kilesa*; Skt, *kleśa*) that afflict living beings. Drawing on both these general senses, *vinaya* refers to the Buddha’s moral discipline. These are important and subtle concepts in Buddhist doctrine, and we cannot do them justice here. Whether teaching the Dharma or displaying superhuman powers, however, the Buddha’s miracles can be seen as a function of his mission to lead people towards freedom from rebirth and suffering.

Thus, conflict and motive are two of the narrative elements that can be used to connect the stories of the Buddhist miracles to each other and to a general discourse on the miracle. The two themes are interrelated in the sense that conflict between the Buddha and the rival teachers, or between the Buddha and Māra, forms the backdrop for comparing the rival teachers’ and Māra’s motives for pressing their challenges with the motivation of the Buddha in answering their challenges. Focusing on these themes helps

to show how teaching the Dharma and displaying superhuman powers can both be seen as miracles from the standpoint of their greater significance for the world.

Both the conversion of the Kāśyapa brothers and the miracles at Śrāvastī and Sāṅkāśya possess another narrative feature that is common to many miracles tales: a succession of miracles building up to a climax. The next section will focus on this narrative feature, suggesting that this “crescendo effect” helps to emphasize another of the primary themes of the Buddha’s miracles: his superiority. The crescendo of miracles adds another way in which displays of superhuman power and teaching the Dharma can work together or sequentially in order to produce an effective miracle.

#### A Crescendo of Miracles

While the conversion of the Kāśyapa brothers features a succession of miracles, in all versions except that of the *Mahāvastu*, the sequence of miraculous displays of superhuman power creates an impasse that is solved by the Buddha resorting to other methods of conversion. In the *Mahāvastu*, the miracles become more and more marvelous until the culmination is reached with the taming of the fire-breathing snake. The different versions of the miracles at Śrāvastī and Sāṅkāśya also possess this crescendo effect. The sequence of wonders builds up tension, reaching a climax with a display that emphasizes the scope and power of the Buddha’s miraculous ability. The crescendo of miracles thus helps to address one of the basic problems underlying the Buddhist discourse on miracles. If others possessed superhuman knowledge and power, then what is special about the Buddha?

It is not possible to know what the earliest versions of the story of the defeat of the rival teachers might have contained, but the motif of the tree recurs in one way or another in nearly all versions of the story. Archeological evidence from Bhārhut and Sāñci shows a story of the defeat of the rival teachers occurring beneath a wide, fruited tree with large leaves. The *Milinda-pañha* mentions a miracle under a mango tree, but does not specify what this miracle entailed. In the *Dhammapada* commentary, the Buddha instantaneously grows a mango tree from the pit of a mango given to him by the king's gardener, Gaṇḍa. In the Dharmaguptaka *Vinaya*, a fruited tree of unspecified type is grown from a toothpick. In these versions of the story, however, the miracle of the tree is the first of the preliminary miracles, not the climax.<sup>55</sup>

After a sequence of miracles designed to enhance the crescendo effect, another miracle is depicted as the climax of the story. In Pāli versions of the tale, the “twin miracle” (*yamaka-pāṭihāriya*) features as the principal miracle performed at Śrāvastī. In the *Dhammapada* commentary, for instance, it is called the “Great Miracle” (*mahā-pāṭihāriya*). In the *Divyāvadāna* and Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya*, however, the twin miracle is followed by a third miracle, which is called the “Great Miracle.” This increases the crescendo effect, as we will see.

In the *Dhammapada* commentary, the crescendo is also enhanced beyond the performance of the twin miracle by the fact that it is followed by the Buddha ascending to the heaven of the Thirty-Three, segueing seamlessly into the story of the miraculous descent at Sāñkāśya.<sup>56</sup> This makes it slightly unclear whether the twin miracle still functions as the climax of the story. In fact, the story seems to rise, then fall, and rise again, but always building towards a climactic point that emphasizes the superiority of the Buddha to all other beings.

Let us focus on the description of the twin miracle in the *Dhammapada* commentary. It quotes from a passage in the *Paṭisambhidā-magga* describing the twin miracle in these terms:

What is known regarding the twin miracle performed by the Buddha? On this occasion, the Buddha performed the twin miracle, a miracle not shared with his disciples. Flames of fire shot from his upper body, while water streamed from his lower body, [and vice versa]. Flames of fire shot from his front body, while water streamed from his back body, [and vice versa]. Flames of fire and streams of water came from his right and left eyes, his right and left ears, his right and left nostrils, his right and left shoulders, his right and left hands, his right and left sides, his right and left feet, the tips and bases of his fingers, and from every pore of his body. Six colored were they: blue, yellow, red, white, pink and luster. The Blessed one walked and his conjured double stood, sat or lay down.... and his conjured double lay down while the Blessed one walked, stood or sat.<sup>57</sup>

As we see here, the twin miracle involves manipulating opposing forces of nature, fire and water, to produce something of a pyrotechnical display in the sky. However, at the end, the passage also mentions a “conjured double” (*nimmita*) that walks while he stands, and so forth. After quoting this passage, the *Dhammapada* commentary elaborates upon it. It beautifully describes the six colored rays of light, but more importantly, it mentions that the Buddha performed the twin miracle and preached the dharma as he did so. He taught a great multitude, each individual to his or her specific aptitude. Then, he creates a double to whom he asks questions and from whom he receives answers, and vice versa. While distinguished from the performance of the miracle, teaching the dharma is integrated into the event.

In the *Dhammapada* commentary, the twin miracle is also said to be an act that only the Buddha could perform, but in the *Divyāvadāna*, the Buddha performs the fire and water portion of the twin miracle and afterwards proclaims to the king that it is something that all the Buddha’s disciples can perform. While it is true that the twin

miracle is not unique to this episode and is sometimes performed by disciples, here the statement helps to produce the crescendo effect. What follows is called the “Great Miracle,” an act that produces a complex image. First, the Buddha is lifted off the ground by a huge, jeweled lotus flower created by two serpent-kings. From this lotus emerge more lotuses upon which conjured Buddhas sit until the sky is filled with an “array of Buddhas” (*buddha-avataṃsaka*) up to the very peak of existence. These conjured Buddhas walk, stand, sit, lie down, emit flames, and perform the twin miracle. One asks questions, while the other answers.<sup>58</sup>

In one sense, the Great Miracle of the *Divyāvadāna* seems to disambiguate the description of the twin miracle that one finds in the *Paṭisambhidā-magga*. Then, it expands on the theme of multiplication by having Buddha replicas fill the sky. This is an extremely important narrative development, for multiplication miracles also feature significantly in a number of Mahāyāna Buddhist miracle tales, the analysis of which will be the focus for Chapter Five. Any comparison of miracles in Mahāyāna and non-Mahāyāna Buddhist literature needs to take into account the development of multiplication miracles. Also, as we discuss the different classifications and typologies of superhuman powers in Chapter Four, we will see that powers of multiplication, physical transformation and conjuring seem to increase in importance as South Asian Buddhist literature develops.

In any case, like the twin miracle of the *Dhammapada* commentary version, the Great Miracle of the *Divyāvadāna* also remains partly a teaching miracle, emphasizing the truth of the Buddha’s understanding of reality and the perfection of his teaching abilities. After the performance of the Great Miracle, the *Divyāvadāna* depicts the Buddha converting the disciples of the rival teachers, and many divine and human



witnesses, while the defeated rival teachers flee the scene. Thus, the miraculous event culminates in a miracle that combines the display of superhuman power and teaching of the Dharma, leading to mass conversion.

The Buddha's ascent to the heaven of the Thirty-three and his sojourn there also exemplifies the dual application of superhuman power and teaching. The story goes that the Buddha teaches the *Abhidharma* to his mother in the heaven of the Thirty-three during the monsoon season, thus converting her. His descent from the heavens at Sāṅkāśya upon a jeweled staircase, flanked by the most powerful of the gods, serves to apotheosize the Buddha. As the Buddha stands on the summit of Mt. Meru, surveying many thousands of worlds, "gods looked upon men, and men looked upon gods; in all the assembly, thirty-six leagues in circumference, all that saw the glory (P: *sirī*; Skt: *śrī*) of the Buddha wished [to achieve] the state of a Buddha."<sup>59</sup> This marvelous apotheosis also becomes an opportunity for teaching the Dharma, and as the Buddha descends to earth, he teaches the Dharma to a great mass of people, who all achieve higher states of attainment as a result.

#### An Act of Truth and the Rhetoric of the Miracle

In the previous sections of this chapter, a number of points have started to become clear. For one thing, we have seen how different types of miracles can be used sequentially in the process of achieving a conversion. We have also seen how teaching the Dharma and displaying superhuman powers can be conceived of as miracles by reason of the fact that they participate in the Buddha's mission to lead people beyond suffering and rebirth. The narrative themes of conflict and motive shared by different

miracle tales bring out the miraculous character of teaching the Dharma and displaying superhuman powers. Finally, we saw how the narrative device of the crescendo of miracles helps to establish the preeminence and superiority of the Buddha.

In this final section of the chapter, we will further substantiate this final point by looking at a particular type of marvelous event known as an “act of truth.” (P: *saccakiriya*; Skt: *satyakriya*). Acts of truth are relatively common marvels in Buddhist literature, but in this section we will focus particularly on several instances that testify to the rhetorical argument, so important in Buddhist miracle tales, that the Buddha, his teachings, and his institutions are foremost.

One of the preliminary episodes in the *Divyāvadāna* leading up to performance of the Great Miracle is the performance of an “act of truth” that restores Prince Kāla’s hands and feet. Kāla, King Prasenajit’s younger brother, is wrongly accused of having liaisons with women in the king’s harem. The king, acting rather impetuously, orders Kāla’s hands and feet cut off, and Kāla is left in anguish in the city square. This circumstance becomes another opportunity for the main theme of the narrative to emerge, but in a new and interesting way.

The rival ascetics come across the gruesome sight of Kāla in his terrible condition and Kāla’s friends call upon them to perform an act of truth on behalf of Kāla. The ascetics decline their request, citing the fact that Kāla is a devotee of the Buddha. The law of the ascetics, they say, dictates that the Buddha ought to be the one to restore his body. Hearing this, Kāla thinks, “The Blessed One is not aware that I am in distressful and difficult straits,” and makes a plea to “him who is free of affliction and compassionate towards all beings.” But the Buddha is aware, and sends Ānanda to perform an act of truth for Kāla.

Acts of truth are not included in standard lists of superhuman powers, but they are undoubtedly among the marvelous events contained in Buddhist literature. For instance, the *Naḷapāna Jātaka* lists four “miracles (*pāṭihāriya*) that will last for the entire age” (*kappaṭṭhiya*), referring to four stories of miraculous events, one of which is the *Naḷapāna Jātaka* itself.<sup>60</sup> The effects of these four miracles will last until the end of the age, and two of the four involve acts of truth.

In the *Milinda-pañha*, Nāgasena also suggests that acts of truth are causally connected to the superhuman powers.<sup>61</sup> In an interesting exchange, King Milinda asks Nāgasena to explain the causal basis of the restoration of King Sibi’s eyes in *Sibi Jātaka*. Nāgasena goes on to explain that it the power of truth has restored Sibi’s eyes, and this truth-act has “cultivation” (*bhāvanā*) as its causal basis. Cultivation could refer here specifically to meditation practices, but it could just as easily refer to the general cultivation of the perfect virtues that produce the superhuman powers and characteristics of the Buddha.

Acts of truth are complex phenomena. At the basic level, they are utterances of truth that produce intended or desired consequences: “By the truth of X, let Y happen.” The efficacy of the act of truth lies with the speaker, the utterance, the referent, or some combination of these. In some instances, the speaker of an act of truth calls upon the gods or natural forces in the name of the truth, making the cause even less clear. Is truth the proximate cause, or has nature or the gods simply responded to the utterance of the truth?

Take, for instance, the *Naḷapāna Jātaka*. The Buddha, in a previous life as a monkey-king, performs an act of truth to hollow out all the reeds growing in a pond, thus making it possible for his monkeys to drink water out of the pond without being captured by the demon (*rakḥasa*) that inhabits it. The story tells us that the monkey king “had a

reed brought to him, called to mind the ‘perfect virtues’ (*pārami*) [that all Bodhisattvas must perfect in order to become Buddhas], performed an act of truth and blew into the cane, which immediately became completely hollow.” The precise nature of the utterance is not described here, but the description of the act is interesting. Why, for instance, did he blow on the cane? It seems to be superfluous to the mechanics of the act, an artistic flourish. Yet, because of the vagueness of the statement, perhaps the author felt the necessity of somehow indicating the direction and intention of the act. In any case, the story tells us that the monkey-king next uttered the command: “May all the reeds growing around this pond be completely hollow!” The commands (*adhiṭṭhāna*) of the Bodhisattvas, the story explains, are efficacious “due to the greatness of the merits they have accumulated.”

In this case, the truth that lies behind the command seems to be the fact that Bodhisattvas accumulate great merit by practicing the perfect virtues. The monkey-king embodies this truth by practicing the virtues himself. Furthermore, one of the virtues the Bodhisattva perfects in the list of ten contained in the *Visuddhimagga* is “truth” (P: *sacca*; Skt *satya*).<sup>62</sup> While an utterance seems required to bring about the desired consequence, in this case there is nearly complete symmetry between the truth of the utterance, the merit of the speaker, and perhaps the fact that Bodhisattvas gain merit through practicing the virtues.

A similar situation occurs in the *Jātaka* of the Quail, which relates the second of the four miracles that last for the entire age.<sup>63</sup> In this story, the Buddha and his company encounter a forest fire. His companions crowd around him for protection. When the Buddha stops at a certain spot, the flames cannot approach. The companions marvel at the power (*anubhāva*) and virtue (*guṇa*) of the Buddha, but the Buddha responds that no

present power (*bala*) of his has stopped the fire, but an act of truth he performed at the place in a past life. At the same spot, he had been born previously as a quail. While he was still too young to fly or walk, a great forest fire had arisen, and all the birds, including his parents, fled, leaving the young quail by himself. The quail, alone and helpless, conceived the following thought:

In this world verily exists the virtue of morality (*sīla-guṇa*), verily, the virtue of the truth. Verily, there are all-knowing Buddhas, who cultivate immeasurable kindness for all beings. [They] possess [the virtues] of patience, compassion, empathy and truth, being endowed with the sight and knowledge of liberation by morality, meditation and wisdom. In the past, [they] fulfilled the perfect virtues (*pārami*) and attained complete awakening beneath the bodhi tree. As a result, [certain] virtues and qualities are mastered. In me, too, there is a single truth. One existing, essential quality (*sabhāva-dhamma*) is evident. Therefore, calling to mind the Buddhas of the past and the virtues they have mastered, and focusing on the existing, essential quality of truth in me, I will perform an act of truth to force the fire to go back, saving myself and the rest of the birds.

Then, the Bodhisattva recalled the virtues of the Buddhas of the past [and], with reference to the essence of truth existing within him, performed an act of truth, uttering this verse:

It is true that my wings do not fly, true that my feet don't walk;  
And my mother and father have left [me]. Jātaveda, turn back!<sup>64</sup>

As though by command, the fire recedes, and from that moment no fire can touch the spot until the world is destroyed at the end of the age.

Both of these *Jātaka* tales are focused on the theme of truth as one of the virtues that Bodhisattvas must perfect in order to become Buddhas. The miracles that both stories relate are ongoing in the sense that the effects persist. In the first place, however, the events are miraculous for several reasons. Not only are they marvelous displays of the power of truth-utterances; they also exemplify the type of actions that lead to becoming a Buddha. The superhuman qualities of a Buddha result from perfecting virtues such as truth, and with their actions, the quail and the monkey-king show themselves to be on the

path to Buddhahood. The quail's statement makes explicit what seems to be only implicit in the *Naḷapāna Jātaka*: the utterance of an act of truth affirms the truth of a state of affairs.

Returning to the restoration of Kāla in the *Prātihārya-sūtra*, there is a similar polyvalence implied in the truth utterance that the Buddha instructs Ānanda to make. The Buddha tells Ānanda to go to Kāla, put his hands and feet where they ought to go, and recite this statement:

Among the beings [in the world] that are legless, one-legged, two-legged, many-legged, formless, possessing physical form, conscious, unconscious and neither conscious nor unconscious the complete, perfect Buddha, the Model (*tathāgata*), the Saint (*arhat*) is said to be foremost. Among the factors of existence (*dharma*) that are conditioned or unconditioned, the *dharma* that is free of desire is said to be foremost. Among the communities, groups, societies and organizations, the community (*saṃgha*) of disciples of the Buddha is said to be foremost. By the utterance of this truth, may your body be as it was before!<sup>65</sup>

The Buddha tells Ānanda to place Kāla's severed hands and feet against his bloodied limbs so that he may perform an act of "psychic surgery." The act of truth becomes his surgical tool. Here the causation is clearer than the other cases. For there is no question that Ānanda believes what the Buddha has told him to say. He is merely the mouthpiece for the statement of truth, and the weight of causation falls upon the statement itself. The efficacy of the act confirms the truth behind the utterance. The Buddha is the paragon of the world. It would be difficult to find a clearer statement of the major theme of the miracle tale in Buddhist literature. Miracles establish the Buddha, his teachings, and his community as uniquely foremost.

The episode also possesses some of the recognizable structural elements of the Buddhist miracle, and thus it fits into the sequence of miracles leading up to the Buddha's performance of the Great Miracle. After having his body restored, Kāla achieves the state

of “non-returning” and acquires superhuman powers. His attainments are said to be due to the awe (*saṃvega*) he feels for the wondrous, powerful presence power (*anubhāva*) that Buddhas possess. Although the Buddha does not teach Kāla the Dharma in the *Divyāvadāna*, in other versions of the story, such as the Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya*, Kāla’s attainments result from the Buddha’s preaching. Thus, even in this minor miracle in the sequence of miracles leading up to the Great Miracle, teaching follows marvelous event, resulting in spiritual transformation.

### Conclusion

This chapter began with the claim that various overlapping lists of miracles, significant events, places where such events occurred, earthquakes caused by such events and so on could be used to connect a group of narratives to each other. While acknowledging that any narrative in which “miracles” occur could technically qualify as a “miracle tale,” priority was given to a particular set of narratives in which certain “types” of miracles occur. When one compares the various lists of significant events in the Buddha’s last life with the three-fold typology of miracles, certain significant events become highlighted, for instance, the first sermon and the miracles of Śrāvastī and Sāṅkāśya. These are paradigmatic examples of miracles of teaching the Dharma and displaying superhuman powers.

When one looks at the story of the first sermon that appears in the *Vinaya* collections of various early Buddhist monastic groups, one sees clearly that it is a conversion event among others. Shortly after giving the first sermon and converting his five former companions, the Buddha converts Yaśas. Shortly after that, he converts the

three Kāśyapa brothers. When one analyzes various versions of the conversion of the Kāśyapa brothers, one discovers that telepathic ability, the third type of miraculous display, figures prominently. However, far from being regarded as mere magic, as suggested by the *Kevaṭṭa-sutta*, the Buddha's display of telepathic ability seems (in some versions) to bring about the conversion of the most senior of the Kāśyapa brothers. Superhuman powers also seem to play a necessary, if not sufficient role. Finally, the Buddha teaches the Dharma to the Kāśyapa brothers, completing a complex conversion process that draws upon all three types of miraculous display.

In addition to the correspondence between various lists of miracle types and miracle tales, a host of common narrative themes connects the various miracles to each other and illustrates how they these events can all be considered miracles. For instance, the Buddha's motivations for teaching the Dharma and displaying his superhuman powers both speak to the significance of the Buddha's mission to lead other beings to freedom from suffering and rebirth. Moreover, the Buddha's miracles, as exemplified by the theme of conflict between rival teachers and the narrative form of the crescendo of miracles, serve to demonstrate the Buddha's supreme holiness. Finally, we saw how the theme of the Buddha's superiority can be emphasized using the narrative form of the miraculous "act of truth."



<sup>1</sup> In fact, there is a debate regarding the precise nature of the twin miracle, and it seems that the Buddha also performed the twin miracle at other times. For instance, he displayed the twin miracle upon his return in front of his kinsmen upon his return to the city of Rājagṛha.

<sup>2</sup> The term seems more commonly used in reference to Chinese Buddhist Literature. See, for instance, Gjertson 1981. See also Kieschnick 1997: 69.

<sup>3</sup> These are first two of the three “knowledges” (P: *vijjā*; Skt: *vidyā*), the memory of past lives and the divine eye, which the Buddha acquired during the first two watches of the night he achieved awakening. They are also the second and the fourth of the six “superpowers” (P: *abhiññā*; Skt: *abhijñā*) that alternatively describe the Buddha’s fantastic abilities.

<sup>4</sup> Reiko Ohnuma makes this point without using the terms superpower or miracle tale. See Ohnuma 2007

<sup>5</sup> Div:143-166. I recognize that “tale” is a free translation of the term *sūtra*, which in a Buddhist context is a Sanskrit translation of the Pāli or Prakrit term, *sutta*. *Sutta* is commonly translated as “discourse.” As is well-known, there are two possible etymologies of the term from the Sanskrit terms, *sūkta* and *sūtra*. I tend to think that *sutta* makes more sense when derived from *sūkta*, something that is “well-said.” Take, for instance, the phrase found (among other place) in the Aśoka’s famous Bhabra rock edict: “Whatever the Blessed One has said, venerable sirs, is of course well-said” (Nikam and McKeon 1959: 66). Andy Rotman chooses not to translate *sūtra* in his translation of the title and calls this story, “The Miracle Sūtra.” See Rotman 2008:253.

<sup>6</sup> M iii.118ff.

<sup>7</sup> Cf Mv i.149-150.

<sup>8</sup> Cf Mv i.220-222. Also, MA iv.184 = DA ii.438, where it is said that the streams of water were not needed for cleansing, so the warm one was for playing and the cool one for drinking.

<sup>9</sup> Cf Mv i.221; J i.53.

<sup>10</sup> See *Traité*, vol 1., pp. 6-10, for numerous versions of the event.

<sup>11</sup> A ii.130ff.

<sup>12</sup> D ii.107.

<sup>13</sup> D ii.140-41.

<sup>14</sup> See, for instance, Parimoo 1982:1-2. I don’t see that one can definitively establish the question of “original meaning.” It is likely, I think, that there was never a strict distinction between *pātihāriya* and *acchariya-abbhuta-dhamma*. However, it may be that *acchariya* and *abbhuta* occur more often in the Pāli *suttas* in places where the events might just as easily have been described as *pātihāriya*, and yet are not. Perhaps there was a shift in usage over time.

<sup>15</sup> DA ii.241.

<sup>16</sup> The twin miracle was performed on more than one occasion, thus it is conceivable that Buddhaghosa could be referring to another event, such as the Buddha’s return to his hometown of Kapilavastu.

<sup>17</sup> See Rhi 1991:20-21.

<sup>18</sup> See Legge 1886:68, 90.

<sup>19</sup> In the *Divyāvadāna*, the ten invariable actions are as follows: (1) predict a future Buddha, (2) produce the thought for supreme, complete awakening in a second being, (3) convert all those people who he should have converted, (4) live out at least three quarters of his life span, (5) make a clear demarcation (*sīmābandha*) [of the truth], (6) establish two disciples as foremost, (7) display [the miracle] of the descent from the heavenly realm at Sāṅkāśya, (8) explain the past thread of action (*karma-ploti*) [and its connection to the present] having traveled to Lake Anavatapta accompanied by the disciples, (9) establish his parents in the truths, and (10) perform the great miracle at Śrāvastī. Div:150. The *Divyāvadāna* version of the story is clearly based on the *Mūlasārvāstivāda-vinaya*, but includes possibly later additions or emendations. In the *Mūlasārvāstivāda-vinaya*, the Śrāvastī miracle is one of only five events that the Buddha must perform. The list of five includes 1, 2, 3, 9, and 10 from the above list. See Rhi 1991:273. Rhi also cites a passage from the *Ekottara-āgama* (T 125:703b) that gives a five-fold list that includes 1, 2, 3, and 9 from above, as well as the first sermon. Rhi 1991:21. I find it interesting that the list in the Chinese *āgama* is the same as the *Mūlasārvāstivāda-vinaya*, except that the first sermon replaces the Śrāvastī miracle.

<sup>20</sup> According to one list, (NG 61), the 12 deeds of the Buddha are: 1) Descending from Tushita Heaven (*pho ba*), 2) Entering the mother’s womb (*lhum zhugs*), 3) Taking birth (*bltams pa*), 4) Becoming skilled in worldly arts and demonstrating physical prowess (*bzo dang*), 5) Enjoying a retinue of queens (*rol rtse*), 6) Renouncing the world (*nges ’byung*), 7) Practicing austerities and renouncing them (*dka’ spyad drug*), 8)

Entering the path (*gshegs*), 9) Defeating Mara (*bdud sde bcom*), 10) Attaining awakening (*byang chub*). 11) Turning the Wheel of the Dharma (*chos 'khor*). 12) Attaining cessation (*myang 'das*).

<sup>21</sup> Particularly important are steles from Sārnāth, dating to the 5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> century, and from Bihar, dating from the Pāla period.

<sup>22</sup> Mil:113ff.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. V i.1-44.

<sup>24</sup> In the *Tevijja-vacchagotta Sutta*, the Buddha confirms that no *ājīvaka* has achieved *nirvāṇa*, and none has gone to heaven, except for one, who believed in the efficacy of action.

<sup>25</sup> V i.8. Also see M i.171. Other sources vary in their telling of the story, but the Ājīvaka's skepticism usually does come out, at least on the interpretation of modern scholars. See Bareau 1963:155-160. The *Catuspariṣat-Sūtra* seems to be an exception, suggesting perhaps that the episode was interpreted in various ways. The meaning of the expression, "Maybe so..." (*Hupeyya*), is not particularly clear. VA glosses it with, "It may indeed be thus" (*evampi nāma bhaveyya*).

<sup>26</sup> D iii.35

<sup>27</sup> The story is found in the *Vinaya* collections of the Theravāda (i.e. the Pali version), Mahīśāsaka, Dharmaguptaka, and Sarvāstivāda. The first is extant in Pali, while the next two are extant only in Chinese. The last is fully extant in Chinese and Tibetan, and portions of it exist in Sanskrit. In addition to these is the *Catuspariṣat-sūtra*, which is nearly identical to the version found in the *Mūla-sarvāstivāda-vinaya*. The first three versions of the story have been analyzed in detail by André Bareau. He does not include an extensive analysis of the *Mūla-sarvāstivāda-vinaya* or *Catuspariṣat-sūtra*. For an explanation of his reasons for not doing so, see Bareau 1963:8-9.

<sup>28</sup> V i.34. The early translators, Rhys-Davids and Oldenberg, suggest that the passage containing this reference to the total number of miracles was interpolated, perhaps due to the fact that the comment seems rather out of place. See Rhys-Davids and Oldenberg 1885:133. There is no such phrase in other versions of the story. See Bareau 1963:316. Whether or not it is a late addition, the material point of the passage seems to emphasize the fact that the Buddha performed many marvelous displays of superhuman power on the occasion. In the *Catuspariṣat-sūtra*, the number of miracles totals eighteen.

<sup>29</sup> V i.32. In the *Catuspariṣat-sūtra*, Kāśyapa sometimes alternatively says, "...but I am a saint like him." Cps, p. 244. Other versions alternate between the two phrases. See Bareau 1963.

<sup>30</sup> Rhi remarks that the incident of the conversion of the Kāśyapa brothers has been depicted artistically by an image of the Buddha holding his bowl with the snake coiled up in it. Rhi 1991.

<sup>31</sup> V i.32.

<sup>32</sup> Bareau 1963:304.

<sup>33</sup> Cps: 320.

<sup>34</sup> In these stories, a great deal of emphasis is placed on the Buddha's ability to read others' minds, but it is unclear whether these stories also wish to suggest that the Buddha's telepathic ability distinguishes him from the rival ascetics. It is sometimes claimed, however, that the Buddha has the ability to read others' minds, while others do not have the same ability to read his mind.

<sup>35</sup> Bareau 1963:305. Here I am translating Bareau's French translation of the Chinese, because I do not have the aptitude to read the Chinese myself. However, I do not believe that "supernatural power" is an appropriate translation of the Sanskrit term, *ṛddhi*, or its Indic equivalents, which is ostensibly what the Chinese is translating here. It may aptly translate the Chinese translation, but I cannot say for certain whether this is the case. I will discuss *ṛddhi* and its translation in more detail in the next chapter.

<sup>36</sup> The classic article on the concept of *saṃvega* is by Ananda Coomaraswamy. See Coomaraswamy 1943.

<sup>37</sup> Bareau 1963:318. Again I am translating Bareau's French translation of the Chinese. The Sanskrit terms are included by Bareau.

<sup>38</sup> Bareau 1963:318. The same is true here: I am again translating Bareau, who includes the Sanskrit term. Whether the original had *anusmṛti* or *ādeśanā* is not clear to me.

<sup>39</sup> This variant reading is attested in the *Mahāvastu*, and is apparently indicated by Chinese translations of the stories under analysis here.

<sup>40</sup> It seems quite possible that the Indic version of the Dharmaguptaka *Vinaya* on which the Chinese translation was based could have read *ādeśanā*, and produced the difficulties of interpretation that led to its being translated with a word for memory. However, the explanation of this second miracle is equivalent to "teaching the Dharma" in the list of the Mahīśāsaka *Vinaya*, and *Kevaṭṭa-sutta*. Clearly, there are some

significant problems when it comes to understanding the meaning of *ādesanā* in the various understandings of the three-fold list of miracles.

<sup>41</sup> Cps: 320.

<sup>42</sup> D i.213-214.

<sup>43</sup> Mv iii.425.

<sup>44</sup> Mv iii.426.

<sup>45</sup> T 1428:946b-951c. Translated from Chinese in Rhi 1991:223-237.

<sup>46</sup> Why 1,250 monks? The text is not clear, but the number is not unprecedented. In the *Mahāvastu*, this is also the number of Brahmin ascetics that the Buddha converts on the occasion of converting the three Kāśyapa brothers and their nephew. See Mv iii.434.

<sup>47</sup> T 202:360c-366a. Translated from Chinese in Rhi 1991:238-251. The text was translated from Chinese into Tibetan. An English translation from the Mongolian translation of the same was made by Stanley Frye. See Frye 1981. For a discussion of formation and history of this narrative collection, see Lévi 1925.

<sup>48</sup> Div:150.

<sup>49</sup> V i.5.

<sup>50</sup> Mv iii.314.

<sup>51</sup> Mv iii.318.

<sup>52</sup> See above, footnote 19.

<sup>53</sup> Mv iii.137.

<sup>54</sup> See V i.235 for one occurrence of this common phrase in the Pāli Canon.

<sup>55</sup> In the *Divyāvadāna* and Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya* versions, there is no story of Gaṇḍa's mango tree, while no story of Kāla is found in the versions that contain the mango tree miracle. However, in the *Divyāvadāna* and Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya* versions, Kāla becomes a grove-keeper known as Gaṇḍaka, which means "One with Parts," perhaps because his body parts were severed and put back together. Before the performance of the Great Miracle, he flies to the land of Uttarakuru (or Mt. Gandhamādāna in the Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya*) to retrieve a tree to place in front of the miracle pavilion.

<sup>56</sup> In this version, the defeat of the ascetics occurs before the twin miracle, perhaps so that the story of the descent at Sāṅkāśya can be more smoothly integrated into the story.

<sup>57</sup> DhA iii.213; Psm i.125.

<sup>58</sup> Div:161-162.

<sup>59</sup> DhA iii.225.

<sup>60</sup> J i.172 = #20. The other three stories are "The Quail (*vaṭṭaka*) *Jātaka* (*Jātaka* #35), "The Hare" (*sasa*) *jātaka* (*Jātaka* # 316), and "The Potter Tale" or *Ghaṭṭikāra-Sutta* of the *Majjhima-nikāya* (M ii.45ff).

<sup>61</sup> Mil:119ff.

<sup>62</sup> Vsm:270. The listing of the ten perfections in the *Visuddhimagga* occurs at the end of the ninth chapter on the *Brahma-vihāras*.

<sup>63</sup> J i.211-215

<sup>64</sup> J i.213-214. *Jātaveda* is an archaic name for fire or the god of fire that occurs in Vedic texts. It seems the quail addresses the fire by name, or refers to it as the god of fire.

<sup>65</sup> Div:154-55.

## Chapter IV

### Superhuman Powers and the Buddhist Path

As we have seen in the previous two chapters, the Buddha is portrayed in Buddhist literature as a superhuman being. He is born among men, but acquires superhuman knowledge and powers that are similar to, but ultimately greater than, those of the gods. The Buddha's miracles demonstrate his magnificence and supreme holiness, though we have seen that they may do so in different ways. Sometimes, the raw power of the Buddha is emphasized as he vanquishes his rivals. In the *Mahāvastu*'s telling of the conversion of the three Kāśyapa brothers, for instance, the Buddha seems to be preeminent because his superhuman powers are the greatest possessed by any being. At least, his superpowers are greater than those of the Kāśyapa brothers whom he converts by means of them.

In the Pāli *Mahāvagga*, however, the Buddha's displays of superhuman powers appear insufficient, although possibly necessary for the successful conversion of the Kāśyapa brothers. And in still more versions of the conversion, as well as in the other miracle tales, like the story of the miracles at Śrāvastī, displaying superhuman powers and teaching the Dharma work together more or less seamlessly to effectuate conversion. Although the language associated with the three types of miracle sometimes makes descriptions of the conversion process more complicated, the miracles nonetheless affirm

the preeminence of the Buddha. Even in the first sermon, which lacks the display of superhuman power, the Buddha converts his five previous companions by verbally affirming his preeminence as a Buddha and then teaching them the Dharma. The Buddha's superhuman powers may be greater than those of other beings, but he is also converts beings by means of his ability to teach them the Dharma. A subtler argument is sometimes found that the superiority of the Buddha lies in his knowledge of reality, which forms the basis for his teaching of the Dharma.

The ability to teach the Dharma is one of the constituents of the Buddha's superhuman knowledge and power. This chapter shifts the focus away from the typology of miracles towards various classifications of superhuman knowledge and power. As we saw in Chapter Two, Vasubandhu, in his discussion of miracles and superhuman powers in the *Abhidharmakośa*, draws an explicit connection between the three miracles and three of the commonly listed types of superhuman knowledge and power: various types of superhuman powers, telepathic ability, and knowledge of the destruction of the defilements. The last of these includes correct knowledge of the nature of reality, which is the basis for teaching the Dharma.

The Buddha seems to acquire much of his superhuman knowledge and power during the awakening, an event that forms a paradigm for the accomplishment of the ultimate goals of the Buddhist path. This is perhaps one of the reasons that the awakening is included in lists of the Buddha's miracles. Just as different miracle tales emphasize different types of miracles, different versions of the awakening include different constituents of superhuman knowledge and power. In some versions of the awakening, the Buddha acquires an array of different types of superhuman power and knowledge;

other versions focus on the Buddha's realization of the nature of reality and his firm knowledge that he has attained liberation from rebirth. The stories of the awakening thus fit into a broader discourse on the nature and significance of various types of superhuman knowledge and power as fruits of following the Buddhist path.

What does it mean to speak of superhuman powers? The chapter continues by looking at a range of interrelated concepts for superhuman knowledge and power, showing how different types of superhuman powers fit into a complex discourse on the ultimate goals of practicing the Buddhist path. Is the preeminent goal simply sainthood, defined as the cessation of rebirth, or is it the unexcelled, perfect and complete awakening that accompanies becoming a Buddha?<sup>1</sup> As we will see, this is a factor in classifying various types of superhuman powers as “mundane” or “transcendent,” Buddhist concepts that also speak to the applicability of Western concepts of natural and supernatural to Buddhism.

The Buddhist discourse on types of superpowers and superhuman powers concerns itself with some of the same questions as the discourse on miracles. Like the concept of the miracle, the Buddhist concepts of superpower and superhuman power are used as a basis for distinguishing between Buddhas, eminent disciples, other Buddhist saints, Buddhists who are nevertheless “ordinary people” (P: *puthujjana*, Skt: *prthagjana*), and non-Buddhists. Distinctions are even made between various levels of Buddhist saint. The emergence and extension of the Bodhisattva ideal adds another layer of complexity to the hierarchy of beings atop which Buddhas sit. These beings may be distinguished from the “independently enlightened” (P: *paccekabuddha*, Skt: *pratyekabuddha*) and other non-Buddhist ascetics, some of whom may possess superhuman powers and others

of whom may not, and the various types of divine beings that populate the Buddhist cosmos, who also possess different types of “superhuman powers.” Some of these hierarchies will be laid out in the last section of the chapter in order to set the foundation for the next chapter’s discussion of miracles in Mahāyāna Buddhist literature. However, let us begin with the miracle of the Buddha’s awakening.

### The Constituents of Awakening

Some versions of the awakening emphasize the characteristic features we have come to associate with Buddhist miracles, such as the various and sundry signs marking the events as portentous. The Earth quakes, flowers fall from the sky in showers, and heavenly music fills the air as creatures of all sorts come to pay homage to the new Buddha. The narratives also establish the momentousness of the event by showing how Śākyamuṇi Buddha, the Buddha of our time and place, repeats a cosmic pattern that all Buddhas follow in their actions.

These elements are particularly characteristic of the longer narrative accounts of the awakening, such as those contained in the *Mahāvastu*, the *Lalitavistara*,<sup>2</sup> and the *Nidānakathā*, the Pāli commentary’s introduction to the *Jātaka* tales, all of which also feature the attack and defeat of Māra. This narrative feature contributes to the dramatic tension of the story, emphasizing the momentousness and sanctity of the Buddha’s mission by pitting him against a cosmic antagonist.

Apart from these narrative accounts, short descriptions of the event are also found in dialogues contained in the canonical collections of different Buddhist groups,

including several different versions found in the *Majjhima-nikāya* of the Pāli Canon.<sup>3</sup> These shorter descriptions of the awakening will be the primary focus here. In the Pāli version that seems to have become the most popular, the awakening is described as a process whereby the future Buddha enters into four successive states or levels of meditative concentration (P: *jhāna*; Skt: *dhyāna*). While abiding in the fourth level, he acquires the three “knowledges” (P: *vijjā*; Skt: *vidyā*), one in each of the three watches or periods of the night.<sup>4</sup>

The classical list of three “knowledges” (*vijjā*, *vidyā*) is as follows: (1) “knowledge [consisting of] remembrance of [all one’s] previous lives” (*pubbe-nivāsa-anussati-ñāṇa*), (2) “knowledge of the births and deaths of [other] beings” (*sattānaṃ cuta-upapāta-ñāṇa*), also known as the “divine eye” (*dibba-cakkhu*), and (3) “knowledge that the defilements have been destroyed” (*āsavānaṃ khāya-ñāṇa*).<sup>5</sup> The focus of the first two types of knowledge is on the mental and perceptive capabilities of the Buddha. He remembers his actions in his previous lives, and becomes capable of seeing other beings’ destinies unfolding throughout the universe.

The Buddha’s clairvoyance, or “divine eye,” has been interpreted and reinterpreted throughout Buddhist literature. Elsewhere it is expanded to include both extreme perceptive capabilities and intuitive knowledge somewhat similar to “omniscience” (*sarvajñā*), but here in the story of the awakening, it seems to refer specifically to the perception of the passing away and arising of beings. These two powers seem to confirm the Buddhist doctrine of action, feeding into and supporting the third type of knowledge. The third and final knowledge confers upon him an ability to see the nature of reality correctly (*yathābhūtaṃ*) and is said to be the basis for teaching the Dharma.



It is perhaps significant that the version of the awakening just described lacks any explicit reference to superhuman powers or telepathic ability, capabilities that we have seen correspond to the two of the three types of miraculous display. However, in another (perhaps later) version of the Buddha's awakening, found in the *Catuṣpariṣat-sūtra*,<sup>6</sup> the Buddha acquires the six "superpowers" (P: *abhiññā*; Skt: *abhijñā*) instead of the three knowledges, two in each of the three watches. The *Mahāprajñāpāramitāśāstra* contains an alternate listing of the order in which the Buddha achieves these six superpowers during the night.<sup>7</sup> In these versions of the awakening, superhuman powers are among those included in the list of extraordinary abilities acquired at the awakening.

The story of the Buddha's awakening is one important source for the classification of superhuman knowledge and power. Another is the "Discourse on the Fruits of Renunciation" (*Sāmañña-phala-sutta*) of the *Dīgha-nikāya*.<sup>8</sup> This discourse contains an alternate paradigm for achieving the fruits of the Buddhist path, sainthood and so forth. It does not tell the Buddha's own story, but outlines the path for a Buddhist monk that parallels the Buddha's own awakening process in many ways.

The stages of the path that are outlined in the *Sāmañña-phala-sutta* are classified in terms of three attainments (*sampadā*): (1) moral practices (*sīla*, *śīla*), (2) mind or (P, Skt: *citta*) or mental cultivation, and (3) "discernment" (*paññā*, *prajñā*) or "knowledge" (*vijjā*, *vidyā*). In the first stage, one maintains the monastic precepts and vows. The second stage involves removal of the mental obstructions resulting in the attainment of the four levels of meditation. Of greatest relevance for the typology of superhuman knowledge and power is the third stage, composed of eight members: (1) "knowledge and vision" (*ñāna-dassana*), (2) the ability to create a mind-made body (*mano-maya-kaya*), and (3-8) the six "superpowers" (*abhiññā*).<sup>9</sup>

The six “superpowers” (*abhiññā*, *abhijñā*), found in the *Catuṣpariṣat-sūtra* and ubiquitous throughout Buddhist literature, add three more powers to the list of three knowledges. According to the most common ordering, the first three “superpowers” are: (1) “various types of superhuman powers” (P: *aneka-vihitam iddhi-vidham*; Skt: *ṛddhi-vidhiṃ*, *ṛddhi-viṣayaṃ*), (2) “divine hearing” (*dibba-sota*, *divya-śrota*) or clairaudience, whereby one can hear human and divine sounds both near and far, and (3) “knowledge of other people’s thoughts” (*para-sattānaṃ ceto pajānāti*). The final three superpowers are identical to the three knowledges, which are generally listed in the same order as above: (4) remembrance of one’s past lives, (5) the divine eye, and (6) knowledge of the destruction of the defilements.

Clairaudience and telepathic ability expand upon the types of extraordinary mental and sensory perception that are categorized as the fourth and fifth of the superpowers, or the first and second of the three knowledges. The other category of superpower, “various types of superhuman powers” (*iddhi*, *ṛddhi*), includes, as its name indicates, a variety of different powers, including the ability to fly, walk on water, pass through solid mass, create mind-made bodies, multiply oneself, manipulate the basic elements (fire, water, air, earth, and space), conjure replicas and other physical objects, and more.

When one looks at the addition of the three superpowers to the list of three knowledges, an interesting relationship also emerges among them. On one side are various different types of superhuman power (*iddhi*, *ṛddhi*). In the middle are powers of clairvoyance, clairaudience, telepathy, and extraordinary memory. On the other end and in some ways opposed to the others is the knowledge that one’s defilements have been destroyed.

The parallel between this categorization of the superpowers and that of the three types of miracle (*prātihārya*) is unmistakable. This relationship between the typologies of superpower and miracle was also recognized by Vasubandhu, as we noted in Chapter Two. In the *Abhidharmakośa*, Vasubandhu specifically says that the three “miracles” (*prātihārya*) correspond to the first, third, and sixth members of the list of “superpowers” (*abhijñā*).<sup>10</sup> The correspondence between the first and second types of miracle and the first and third superpowers is easy to see: they are precisely miraculous displays of superhuman powers (*iddhi, ṛddhi*) and telepathic ability.<sup>11</sup>

Crucial for understanding the relationship between miracles and superpowers is the correspondence between the third type of miracle, teaching the Dharma, and the third type of “knowledge” (or sixth “superpower”): “the knowledge that one’s defilements have been destroyed.” This “knowledge” seems to be composed of at least two components. One part is an authentic knowing of one’s own sainthood. The second component is a correct understanding of the nature of reality “as it is” (*yathābhūta*). Thus, descriptions of the third power or sixth superpower usually also contain references to basic Buddhist doctrines like the four noble truths. Knowing that one has achieved one’s goal and that one correctly understands the nature of reality gives one the ability to teach the Dharma. And just as teaching the Dharma is sometimes said to be the foremost of the miracles, Vasubandhu views the knowledge that one’s defilements have been destroyed as the foremost of the Buddha’s superpowers.

To understand better the significance of this apparent opposition between superhuman powers and correct knowledge of the nature of reality, and the place of both among the various fruits of the Buddhist path, we first must gain a more detailed understanding of the Buddhist conception of superhuman powers. As we will see in the

next two sections, there are various causes and types of superhuman powers, many of which are not technically “outside” the realm of cause and effect sometimes called *samsāra*. Since superhuman powers are thus considered to be “mundane” or “worldly,” they are not necessarily “free of defilement.” In contrast, the acquisition of *nirvāṇa* is sometimes considered to be “transcendent” or “transmundane.” This basic contrast is one part of a debate concerning the place of acquiring superhuman powers among the overarching goals of the Buddhist path.

### Various Types of Superhuman Powers

We have already seen some of the various and overlapping typologies of superhuman knowledge and power found throughout Buddhist literature. Two of them are the three “knowledges” (P: *vijjā*; Skt: *vidyā*) and the six “superpowers” (P: *abhiññā*; Skt: *abhijñā*). This section focuses on different classifications of “superhuman power” (P: *iddhi*, Skt: *ṛddhi*) that are included in the catchphrase, “various types of superhuman power” (*anekavidhiṃ ṛddhividham*). These types of superhuman powers are contained within even broader classifications, such as the ten types of superhuman power found in the Pāli scholastic treatises, the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* and *Visuddhimagga*. As one of the “superpowers,” they are also contained in the list of five “powers” (P: *pabhāva*, Skt: *prabhāva*) used to classify superhuman knowledge and power in the *Abhidharmakośa* and in the Mahāyāna scholastic treatise, the *Bodhisattvabhūmi*.

“Knowledge” (*vijjā/vidyā*), “superpower” (*abhiññā/abhijñā*), “superhuman power” (*iddhi/ṛddhi*), and “power” (*pabhāva/prabhāva*) are some of technical terms used to classify and describe types of superhuman knowledge and power. They connect to a

wider set of terms that includes “*māyā*” (magic, illusion), “power” (*bala*), “knowledge” (*ñāṇa*, *jñāna*), “majestic, quasi-magical presence” (*anubhāva*) and “liberation” (*vimokṣa*).

*Vidyā*, *abhijñā*, and *ṛddhi* are not etymologically connected with each other, but they come to be related through usage and scholastic classification. None is easy to translate into English. I have generally opted to translate them as knowledge, superpower, and superhuman power, respectively. I also use the phrase “superhuman knowledge and power” to describe the broader range of powers categorized as the six different types of superpower. This broader categorization contains the apparent tension between superhuman powers of flight and so forth and correct knowledge of reality. Broader classifications of superhuman power, such as the ten types of *iddhi* in the *Paṭissambhidāmagga* and *Visuddhimagga*, also contain this tension.

*Vidyā* is derived from the root, *vid-*, to know.<sup>12</sup> Thus, it has commonly been translated as knowledge or science. Yet, there is an implicit connection between knowledge and power in the concept of the three types of “knowledge” (*vijjā/vidyā*). The three Buddhist “knowledges” are not merely passive objects of study, but active superhuman capabilities that are put to use in many narrative contexts.<sup>13</sup> For instance, the Buddha actively uses these capabilities when he retells stories of his own and other people’s previous lives. This practical sense of the term is also reflected in the meaning of *vidyā* as magical spell or charm, a usage that we have already seen on several occasions.<sup>14</sup> In other contexts, *vidyā* can have a related sense of skill, art, craft, scholarly discipline and field of knowledge.

*Abhijñā*, like *jñāna* and *prajñā*, derives from *jñā-*, another root for to know. My rendering of *abhijñā* as “superpower” is partly literal, partly figurative. As a verbal prefix, *abhi* can carry a sense of over, upon, into, to. It can also convey greatness, superiority

and intensity. So, *abhijñā* can mean a higher or more direct knowing, or superior knowledge. It has sometimes been translated as “superknowledge,” but this translation strikes me as precisely the kind of “Buddhist hybrid English” that raises more difficulties than it solves. In the context of the six types of *abhijñā*, the term does refer to extraordinary types of knowledge, but it refers equally to superior powers or superpowers, including those categorized as superhuman power or *ṛddhi*.

In its technical meaning as one of the six superpowers, I translate *ṛddhi* as superhuman power. I think “superpower” would also be an appropriate translation for *ṛddhi* in this sense, but I reserve superpower for *abhijñā*. Past translators have translated *ṛddhi* in many different ways: miraculous power, magical power, supernatural power, supernormal power and psychic power being some of the more common ones. Wondrous gift and mystic wonder are also attested translations of *ṛddhi*.<sup>15</sup> All these translations express some valid senses of a slippery term; the exact equivalent for it seems to be lacking in our vocabulary.<sup>16</sup>

Although I choose to translate *ṛddhi* as superhuman power, this is not a literal rendering of the term. Nor are any of the other translation choices given above. In the *Abhidharmakośa*, Vasubandhu says that “superhuman power (*ṛddhi*) stands for meditation (*samādhi*),” and he uses an argument from etymology to justify the point. *Ṛddhi* stands for meditation, he says, because meditation is the means by which one “achieves” or “wins” (*rdhyati, samṛdhyati*; P: *ijhāti, samijhāti*) “superhuman powers.”<sup>17</sup> Following a common line of etymological interpretation, Vasubandhu evokes a literal sense of the term. *Iddhi* or *ṛddhi* derives from the verb, *ardh-*, which means to grow, flourish, prosper and succeed. Literally, *ṛddhi* means accomplishment, success, prosperity or flourishing.

*Ṛddhi* can also mean potency, power, innate talent or virtue. Other synonyms for the term, which are found in the literature of other Indian ascetic traditions, are *siddhi*; *śakti*, “power,” from the root *śak-*, to be able; and *vibhūti*, “power,” which, like *prabhāva* and *anubhāva*, derive from *bhū-*, to become, a root that can also be used to signify strength and might.<sup>18</sup>

As an alternative to my translation, the preferred translation of *iddhi* in many publications (particularly those of the Pali Text Society) as psychic power also has merit. It perhaps best highlights the commonplace Buddhist assumption of the connection between superhuman powers and meditation. Superhuman powers are not only acquired through meditation; often one must enter into a state of meditative trance in order to use the powers.<sup>19</sup> Calling them psychic powers also picks up on the fact that many of the powers classified as *ṛddhi* seem to involve some kind of telekinetic ability. Yet, for me, psychic power does not give a sense for the diverse range of powers that fall under the category of *ṛddhi*, and elicits confusion with other superpowers, such as clairvoyance and telepathy.

The term *iddhi/ṛddhi* has a range of uses and applications far wider than can be conveyed by either psychic power or superhuman power. Sometimes, the term seems to signify a quality that something or someone possesses simply by nature of being what or who it is. For instance, the *Mahāsuddāsana-sutta* of the *Dīgha-nikāya* lists four “prosperous qualities” (*iddhi*) of a king: good looks, long life, good health, and popularity.<sup>20</sup> Elsewhere, the four “prosperities” (*iddhi*) of the wealthy layperson are having a beautiful garden, good food, nice clothes, and different houses for the different seasons of the year.<sup>21</sup> In another context, the “talent” (*iddhi*) of the hunter is to catch his prey, but at the same time, the “power” (*iddhi*) of the animal is to avoid being caught.<sup>22</sup>

In all these various uses of the term, the etymological derivation from flourishing remains apparent, but other layers of meaning are also present, such as the senses of skill, talent, gift, power and quality.

In their technical meaning, as one of the six types of superpower, the various types of superhuman power share in the sense of accomplishment, prosperity, success, and virtuous quality. The standardized list of such powers found in the *Sāmaññaphala-sutta* and in other Pāli canonical sources is as follows:

- (1) “Being one, he becomes many; being many, he becomes one (*ekopi hutvā bahudhā hoti, bahudhāpi hutvā eko hoti*);
- (2) He appears (*āvibhāva*) and he disappears (*tirobhāva*);
- (3) He goes through fences, walls and mountains as if they were air;
- (4) He dives into and emerges out of the ground as if it were water;
- (5) He walks on water as if it were land;
- (6) He flies cross-legged through the sky like a bird on the wing;
- (7) He touches and caresses with his hand even the sun and the moon with their great power and majestic presence;<sup>23</sup>
- (8) He travels in his body up to the heavenly realm of Brahmā.”<sup>24</sup>

This list is standardized in the Pāli canonical literature, but it is far from exhaustive of the kinds of powers that one finds listed among the various types of superhuman powers in other sources. For instance, the list in the *Daśabhūmika-sūtra* adds three to those listed above: the power to cause earthquakes, the ability to emit smoke and flame like “the great fire-element” (*mahān agniskandhaḥ*), and the ability to shoot streams of water from the body like a great raincloud (*mahāmegha*).<sup>25</sup> Recognizable here are two of the powers that the Buddha uses to perform the “twin miracle.” The common portent of the Buddhist miracle, the earthquake, is also present in this alternate list.

The lists culled so far from the *Sāmaññaphala-sutta* and *Daśabhūmika-sūtra* already offer a fairly diverse set of powers, but they still do not exhaust the types of superhuman power that one finds described or categorized as *iddhi* or *ṛddhi*. Just before



its discussion of the various types of superhuman powers, the *Sāmaññaphala-sutta* describes the ability to create a “mind-made body” (*mano-maya-kaya*) as one of the fruits of following the Buddhist path. This ability is described as follows:

Now a monk creates another body from this one, mind-made, with all its limbs and faculties... It is just as though a man were to draw a sword out of its scabbard. He might think, “This is the sword. This is the scabbard. The sword and the scabbard are different. But the sword was drawn from the scabbard.” In just the same way the monk creates another body from this one, mind-made with all its limbs and faculties.

The *Paṭisambhidāmagga* and *Visuddhimagga* classify this ability among the ten types of superhuman power, describing it by citing this very same description from the *Sāmaññaphalasutta*.

The *Paṭisambhidāmagga* and *Visuddhimagga* also insert this ability to create a mind-made body into their explanations of traveling in the body to the heavenly realm of Brahmā, one of the classical powers mentioned above. Here is the description of making a mind-made body in order to visit the heavenly realm of Brahmā:

[The monk] produces a form before Brahmā, a mind-made body with all its limbs and faculties. If the possessor of superhuman powers walks up and down, the conjured replica (*nimmita*) walks up and down, too. If the possessor of superhuman powers stands...sits...lies down, the conjured replica does so, too. If the possessor of superhuman powers produces smoke, produces flames, teaches the Dharma, asks a question, answers a question, then the conjured replica does so, too. If the possessor of superhuman powers abides with Brahmā, and converses with him, then so too does the conjured replica. Whatever the possessor of superhuman powers does, the conjured replica does the same thing.<sup>26</sup>

The language used here is similar to descriptions of the so-called twin miracle. In order to perform the twin miracle, as we saw in Chapter Three, the Buddha first shoots flames and jets of water from opposing parts of his body. The Pāli commentaries generally refer to this display of water and fire as the twin miracle. However, after the display of fire and water, the Buddha also produces a replica of himself. The behavior of this replica is

described in language similar to that used above by the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* to describe the mind-made body that visits the realm of Brahmā.

In the alternate version of the Śrāvastī miracles found in the *Prātihārya-sūtra* of the *Divyāvadāna*, the culmination of the event is not the twin miracle, but the “Great Miracle” (*mahāprātihārya*), sometimes referred to as the multiplication miracle in Western scholarship. The Buddha multiplies himself until Buddha-replicas literally fill the sky. The behavior of these replicas is also described in a way that is similar to the actions of the mind-made body in the Brahmā heaven described above. However, the multiplication miracle itself seems most aptly characterized as an instance of “Being one, he becomes many,” one of the standardized list given above.

The ability to create a mind-made body and multiply oneself is similar to another general type of superhuman power classified in the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* and *Visuddhimagga* as the power of “transformation” (*vikubbana*). The *Paṭisambhidāmagga* describes this power by referring to someone named Abhibhū, who is said to be one of the chief disciples of Sikhī, a Buddha of the past. Here is the description of Abhibhū:

While abiding [in the heavenly realm of Brahmā] he instructed (*viññāpesi*) thousands of world-systems (*lokadhatu*) with his voice (*sarena*). He taught the Dharma with his body visible, and he taught the Dharma with his body invisible. He taught the Dharma with the lower half of his body visible and the upper half invisible. He taught the Dharma with the lower half of his body invisible and the upper half visible. Abandoning his natural form (*pakativanna*), he appeared in the form of a small boy. Or he appeared in the form of a *nāga*, *supaṇṇa*, *yakkha*, *inda* (i.e. *asura*), *deva*, *brahma*, an ocean, mountain, forest, lion, tiger, or panther. Or he appeared as a variously arrayed army with elephants, horses, chariots and foot soldiers. This is superhuman power of transformation.

From the first part of the explanation, the power of transformation includes the ability to project one’s voice to other universes and make parts of one’s body appear or disappear while performing an act of teaching. The second part of the description focuses on the

ability to alter one's physical appearance. One may even appear as an inanimate object or set of objects. In commenting on this passage, the *Visuddhimagga* says explicitly that the power of transformation includes the ability to create external objects, citing the case of the creation of an army with elephants, horses, chariots and so forth.

To sum up, so far we have seen a list of the various types superhuman powers, found in the *Sāmaññaphala-sutta* and elsewhere in the Pāli Canon, which contains the powers to multiply oneself, levitate, pass through walls, sink into the ground, walk on water, appear and disappear, travel to the heavenly realms, and touch the sun and moon. To this list, the *Daśabhūmika-sūtra* adds the power to shoot water and fire from the body and the power to cause earthquakes. We have also seen that the power to create a mind-made body, which is similar to the ability to multiply oneself, is classified as one of the types of superhuman power in the later Pāli scholastic texts, the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* and *Visuddhimagga*. Another general type of power found in these later Pāli scholastic texts is the power to transform one's physical appearance.

The standardized list of “various types of superhuman powers” is classified in the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* and *Visuddhimagga* under the general category of superhuman powers of “intention” or “resolution” (*adhiṭṭhāna*, *adhiṣṭhāna*). According to the *Visuddhimagga*, only the superhuman power of intention is explicitly described as “various types of superhuman powers,” but the text says that the superhuman powers of transformation (*vikubbana*, *vikurvaṇa*) and creating a mind made body (*manomayakaya*) should be understood as implied by the phrase. Thus, for the *Visuddhimagga*, these three types of superhuman power form a subset in a broader ten-fold classification.<sup>27</sup>

The Pāli commentary on the *Dīgha-nikāya* also seems to read the superhuman powers of transformation back into the *Sāmaññaphala-sutta*, its canonical source. The

basis for this interpretation is a set of similes that the *Sāmaññaphala-sutta* uses to describe the acquisition and use of the superhuman powers. After listing the various types of superhuman powers, the following comparison is made:

Just as a skilled potter or potter’s assistant who wishes for whatever type of eating vessel produces such a vessel with well-prepared clay, or just as a skilled ivory carver or carver’s assistant who wishes for whatever type of carved ivory produces such it with well-prepared ivory, or just as a skilled goldsmith or goldsmith’s assistant, who wishes for whatever type of gold object, produces it with well-prepared gold, just so a monk, with a mind that is concentrated, purified, cleansed, unblemished, free from defilements, malleable, workable, steady, and imperturbable, applies his mind to the production of various types of superhuman powers.<sup>28</sup>

The text then repeats the standardized list of superhuman powers, as if to clarify precisely which powers are meant. The most straightforward interpretation of the simile seems to be that the monk is like a skilled potter, his mind is like well prepared clay, and the various superhuman powers are like the finished vessel. This interpretation would emphasize the role of meditation in the development of superhuman powers.

However, the Pāli commentary explains the simile differently. It says:

A monk possessed of knowledge of various types of superhuman power (*iddhi-vidha-ñāṇa*) should be seen as a skillful potter and so forth. The knowledge of various types of superhuman power should be seen as well prepared clay and so forth. The monk’s *vikubbana* should be seen as the making of the desired thing, a vessel for eating and so forth.<sup>29</sup>

The commentary appears to interpret the simile to be a reference to the superhuman power of “transformation” (P: *vikubbana*, Skt: *vikurvaṇa*). In the terms of the simile, a monk uses superhuman powers of “transformation” to create any type of object, just as a skilled potter uses well-prepared clay to make any type of pot. Thus, the Pāli commentary tries to read the power of transformation into the *Sāmaññaphalasutta* in way that seems consistent with the *Visuddhimagga*’s statement that the superhuman powers of creating a mind-made body and transformation are also implied in the standardized list of powers.

Why should the commentary wish to do this? As we have begun to see, the standardized list contained in the Pāli Canon is not comprehensive of the types of superhuman power that one finds throughout Buddhist literature. When one looks at categorizations of superhuman power found in the scholastic literature of the various South Asian Buddhist monastic traditions, one can see a widening of the scope of the superhuman powers. One can also see a retrospective attempt to systematize and explain the different types of superhuman power on the basis of common principles. This provides the impetus to read a broader range of powers into canonical sources like the *Sāmaññaphala-sutta*.

Other Buddhist scholastic traditions, exemplified by texts like the *Mahāvibhāṣā* and *Abhidharmakośa*, contain classifications of superhuman power that overlap not only with each other but also with those found in the Pāli canonical and scholastic sources. The *Mahāvibhāṣā* contains a three-fold classification of superhuman powers: (1) [powers of] transportation of the body (*śarīra-vāhinī*), (2) [powers of] “resolve” (*ādhimokṣikī*), and (3) powers of “the speed of mind” (*manojavā*).<sup>30</sup> With the first, one is able to fly like a bird on wing. With the second, one is able to make what is far become near by the force of one’s resolve (*adhimokṣa*).<sup>31</sup> For example, the *Mahāvibhāṣā* tells us, one is able to touch the sun and moon while standing on the earth. Or, the text says, one disappears and appears somewhere else in the time it takes a strong man to bend or straighten his arm.<sup>32</sup> With the third, one travels at the speed of mind to the highest heaven of Akaniṣṭha or to other universes.<sup>33</sup> To exemplify the types of superhuman power, the text cites five of the eight powers in the standardized Pāli list.

The *Abhidharmakośa* also includes the three classes of superhuman power listed in the *Mahāvibhāṣā*, but classifies them all under the general category of superhuman

powers of motion (*gamaṇa*).<sup>34</sup> It is true that many of the powers in the standardized list appear to involve movement: flying, walking on water, traveling to the heavenly realm of Brahmā, appearing and disappearing, and so on. The *Visuddhimagga* illustrates appearing and disappearing by recounting briefly the story of the miraculous descent from the heavens at Sāṅkāśya, which is certainly an example of movement. The power to touch the sun and the moon can also be said to involve motion in two senses. One could decide to fly up to touch them, or one could bring them closer through an act of resolve. However, manipulating spatial dimensions in a paradoxical fashion may or may not best be described as a type of motion.<sup>35</sup>

The other major category of superhuman power, according to Vasubandhu, is the superhuman power of “creation” (*nirmāṇa*).<sup>36</sup> The superhuman powers of creation (*nirmāṇa*; P: *nimmāna*) are more or less equivalent to, but broader than the powers of transformation and making a mind-made body that one finds in the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* and *Visuddhimagga*.<sup>37</sup> Ostensibly, it would also include the power to multiply oneself. Something created by means of the power of *nirmāṇa* is called a “conjured thing” (Skt: *nirmita*; P: *nimmita*), not to be confused with the Pāli and Sanskrit term, *nimitta*, which often means a sign, omen or portent.<sup>38</sup> Note that *nimmita* is the term used by the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* and *Visuddhimagga* to describe the mind-made body that travels to the heaven of Brahmā.

*Nirmāṇa* can also mean an illusory thing or magical creation. In the *Bodhisattvabhūmi*, for instance, where *nirmāṇa* is also one of the two basic types of superhuman power, a magical illusion or *nirmāṇa* is defined as “basically, something without a material basis” (*samāstaḥ nirvastukaṃ nirmāṇaṃ*).<sup>39</sup> The text elaborates: “One accomplishes with a thought of creation (*nirmāṇacitta*) the construction of whatever one

desires—this is called the superhuman power of creation.” The *Bodhisattvabhūmi* tells us that the power of creation also has various types: creation of the body, creation of the voice, and creation of an object. Also, in the Buddhist theory of the three bodies of the Buddha, the concept of the *nirmāṇa-kāya* or “magically created body,” applies to the physical body of the Buddha in this impure universe, but may include other manifestations of the Buddha as other objects. More will be said about this theory in the next chapter.

Another Mahāyāna treatise, the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-śāstra*, also classifies superhuman powers into powers of motion and powers of creation. The power of motion it describes only as the power of levitation. The power of creation, it says, includes the ability to change earth into water, water into earth, air into fire, and fire into air. All of the basic elements, it says, can be manipulated with the power of creation.<sup>40</sup> One can imagine that a similar explanation might hold for the ability to shoot streams of water and flames from the body.

Now, the *Bodhisattvabhūmi* does not divide superhuman powers into powers of motion and creation, though it does contain a two-fold classification. Instead, it classifies superhuman power into “powers of transformation” (*pāriṇāmikī*) and “powers of creation” (*nairmāṇikī*). Although both *pariṇāma* and *vikubbana/vikurvaṇa* mean “transformation,” the powers classified as *pāriṇāmikī-iddhi* by the *Bodhisattvabhūmi* are generally different from those classified as *vikubbana* in the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* and *Visuddhimagga*. The *Bodhisattvabhūmi* tells us that “transformation” (*pariṇāma*) is “changing a thing that naturally exists otherwise into something else.”

However, the classification of superhuman powers of transformation is broader than this brief definition would suggest. It contains a rather motley assortment of

superhuman powers, many of which are reminiscent of earlier classifications we have seen. Here is the *Bodhisattvabhūmi*'s list of powers of transformation:

Shaking [the earth], flaming, pervading [a room or space], displaying (*vidarśana*) [marvelous sights], altering the form (*anyathībhāvakaṛaṇa*) [of things], going and coming (*gamana-āgamana*), reducing and enlarging (*saṃkṣepa-prathana*) [the size of objects], [causing] the body to enter into all forms (*sarva-rūpa-kāya-praveśana*), approaching in a form that is similar (*sabhāgatā-upasaṃkrānti*) [to those before whom one appears], appearing and disappearing, effecting mastery (*vaśitva-karaṇa*) [over beings], dominating the superhuman powers of others (*pararddhi-abhibhavana*), conferring eloquence, conferring memory, conferring happiness, and giving off radiance—[this] is called the superhuman power of transformation in its various aspects.

Many of the powers listed here overlap with those classified differently elsewhere. Included are powers of motion, causing earthquakes, appearing and disappearing, and flaming, which the text describes as including the ability to produce both fire and water. Altering the form of things is described as the manipulation, by means of resolve (*adhimokṣa*), of the basic elements, transforming water into earth, fire into water, and vice versa. Causing the body to enter into all forms is reminiscent of the power to dive into the earth and pass through walls. Also included in this list is the power to transform one's appearance

Other powers listed here, such as effecting mastery over beings and dominating the superhuman powers of others seem to refer to narrative types that we have seen in some stories already, and will feature again as we turn to discuss “The Conversion of the Magician Bhadra” (*Bhadramāyākara-vyākaraṇa*) in the next chapter. Displaying marvelous sights recalls the miraculous descent from the heaven at Sāṅkāśya and features, along with reducing and enlarging the size of objects, in some of the Mahāyāna miracle stories that will be the focus of the next chapter.



This section has focused particularly on the “various types of superhuman powers” that are included in the first category of superpower, from those in the standardized list in the Pāli Canon to various typologies found in later Buddhist scholastic literature. Although the ability to multiply and transform oneself is present in the Pāli standardized list, superhuman powers of transformation and magical creation emerge as a larger category of superhuman powers in later Buddhist scholastic literature.

The different classificatory schemes bring more or less order to the plethora of superhuman powers describe throughout Buddhist literature. We have seen basic commonalities identified among the various types of superhuman power. The scholastic literature also contributes to the development of a complex and varied vocabulary for talking about superhuman powers and their nature, a complexity that is enhanced in Buddhist miracle tales.

The next section of this chapter turns to a few of the explanations Buddhist scholastic texts proffer for the process by which the superhuman powers are acquired and utilized. The issue of explanation is interesting for what it reveals about the Buddhist conception of superhuman powers, but it is also one way of asking a larger question about whether superhuman powers in Buddhist literature fall within or outside the bounds of what one might construe as natural laws of cause and effect. Another way of approaching this question is through the narrative theme of the failure of superhuman powers.

Setting Buddhist explanations of the acquisition, use and failure of superhuman power within the context of this broader question will prepare us to understand an important opposition that is drawn between “common” and “noble” types of superhuman

powers, an opposition that is then reiterated in the dualism between “mundane” and “trans-mundane.” These oppositions, as we will see, highlight in another way the tension between superhuman powers and knowledge that one’s defilements have been destroyed, the first and the sixth types of superhuman knowledge and power (*abhiññā/abhijñā*).

### Acquisition, Use, and Failure of Superhuman Powers

We have seen that superhuman powers can have a variety of causes, including various states of meditation, magical spells and so forth. Sometimes, they are even the result of past action.<sup>41</sup> This is the case, for instance, for the superhuman powers that gods, goddesses and other celestial creatures possess simply as a result of being born as divine beings. Meditation and magic are perhaps the most common explanations for the acquisition and use of superhuman powers by human beings. Using magical implements to perform superhuman feats does not necessarily involve any special attainment of meditative control on the agent’s part. However, in many cases, those who use such magical implements are unable to withstand the greater power of the Buddha’s superhuman powers.

Despite the fact that superhuman powers grant one the ability to control forces of nature, the practice of meditation is not entirely removed from the realm of natural causation. Several factors make this clear. For one thing, the meditative techniques described in the process of acquiring and using superhuman powers invoke principles of mind over matter. Moreover, the practice of meditation is not isolated from other types of action, the requisite actions of the Buddhist path, such as keeping good habits (*śīla*) and giving gifts (*dāna*), which are classified as preliminary to the practice of meditation. Also,

if one's meditative trance is broken for any reason, for instance as a result of passions arising to cloud the mind, then the result is a failure of the superhuman power.<sup>42</sup>

In the *Visuddhimagga*, Buddhaghosa notes that only the Buddha, his eminent disciples, and certain independently awakened saints acquire the various types of superhuman powers during the awakening itself, for only they have accumulated the necessary vast merit over the course of many previous lifetimes. For the rest of us, common monks and ordinary human beings alike, the acquisition of superhuman powers requires either long practice of specific techniques of meditation or the fortuitous acquisition of magical implements.<sup>43</sup>

The fact that superhuman powers are acquired through meditation and other “natural” means seems to be one reason some scholars have been reluctant to use the term “supernatural” in the context of Buddhist discourse.<sup>44</sup> Why should the availability of explanations have any bearing on the use of the term supernatural to describe the powers? This is a question that also arises in the context of Western philosophical discourse on miracles, particularly in the tradition following David Hume. In an essay on miracles as supernatural occurrences, Patrick Nowell-Smith makes the point that any time an explanation can be given—even if the explanation amounts to saying nothing more than God caused a miracle—then that explanation involves predictive expansion based on some type of law. And if there is any type of explanation, any type of cause, then one cannot rightly use the term “supernatural” to describe the miraculous occurrence.<sup>45</sup>

As other philosophers of religion have pointed out, however, there are different kinds of explanation. Richard Swinburne, in a response to Nowell-Smith, claimed that a miracle could be explainable, by means of an explanation based on motive or purpose, and still be considered a miracle.<sup>46</sup> Buddhist definitions of the miracle do not necessarily

emphasize any violation of natural laws, but the question of explanation is still one for us to consider in the context of Buddhist discourse on superhuman powers. What sort of explanations do Buddhist texts employ to describe the acquisition and use of superhuman powers?

Buddhist narratives often posit a causal connection between meditation and superhuman power. For instance, in the story of the conversion of the three Kāśyapa brothers, the Buddha masters fire to tame the fire-breathing snake by entering into the “fire-element” meditation (*tejo-dhātu-samādhi*). Buddhist scholastic texts sometimes go further in proposing more specific explanations. Particular processes of meditation are used to explain how particular types of superhuman powers are acquired and function in various instances. Not only do these explanations involve pseudo-scientific theories, they seem to indicate that the agent gains a certain mastery over basic elements of nature.

After arguing that superhuman powers are acquired through the practice of meditation, the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* goes further in its explanation of the use of superhuman powers. If one wants to utilize the various types of superhuman power, whichever the type, one should cultivate a mental intention or resolution (*adhiṭṭhāna*, *adhiṣṭhāna*) to accomplish the thing so desired. Take the superhuman power of multiplication as an example. The *Paṭisambhidāmagga* describes the process this way:

Being one in nature, [a monk] brings to mind becoming many. He brings to mind becoming a hundred, a thousand, or a hundred thousand. Having brought it to mind, he makes an intention (*adhiṭṭhāti*) with knowledge (*ñāṇa*), “I am many.” He becomes many.<sup>47</sup>

Having entered into a state of meditation, one gives the resolution a verbal form. The verbalized intention then brings about whatever result is intended. This brief explanation becomes the basis for more detailed discussions in the *Visuddhimagga*.

According to the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* and *Visuddhimagga*, the meditator who wishes to acquire and utilize the various types of superhuman power must first achieve meditative mastery over the “objects of total concentration” (*kaṣiṇa-āyatana*, *kṛtsna-āyatana*). These ten objects correspond to the four fundamental elements (earth, air, water, and fire), the four basic colors (blue, red, yellow, and white), light, and space.<sup>48</sup> In order to develop the ability to use the various types of superhuman powers, the *Visuddhimagga* describes a complicated process whereby the meditator develops the ability to focus upon various sets of these objects of meditation, becoming able to shift between them in rapid succession while at the same time shifting from different levels of meditative concentration.

Take this further instance of the description from the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* of the superhuman power of passing through walls, fences and mountains:

At first, one obtains the meditation (*samāpatti*) on space as an object of total meditative concentration (*kaṣiṇa*). Then, one brings to mind the wall, fence or mountain. Having brought them to mind, he makes an intention with knowledge, “Let it become space.” It becomes space. [Then,] one goes unimpeded through the wall, fence or mountain. Just as a man without superhuman powers goes unimpeded through wherever is open [and] unenclosed, in the same way one possessing superhuman powers, possessing mastery of mind, goes unimpeded through wall, fence and mountain as if through air.<sup>49</sup>

In this description, the relationship between certain meditative concentrations on basic elements yields the ability to manipulate such elements to achieve the desired result of passing through the wall. Other superhuman powers are similarly described.

The *Śrāvakahūmi* also offers an explanation of the acquisition and use of the various superpowers that differs somewhat in its technical vocabulary, but seems roughly similar to the explanations found in the Pāli scholastic texts. It explains that meditative

concentration on twelve different “conceptions” or “ideas” (*saññā, samjñā*) produces the six superpowers.

The conceptions of lightness, softness, space, mind-body connection (*kāya-citta-samavadhāna*), and particularly resolution (*adhimukti*), are used to perform the standardized list of superhuman powers of levitation, passing through walls, and so forth. The conception of the recollection of the succession of acts in the past (*pūrva-anubhūta-carya-anukrama-anusmṛti*) corresponds to the remembrance of past lives. The conception of sound combinations and noises of different kinds (*nānā-prakāra-śabda-saṃnipāta-nirghoṣa*) corresponds to divine hearing. The conception of the visible characteristics of light (*avabhāsa-rūpa-nimitta*) corresponds to the divine eye, while the conception of changes in physical nature determined by the defilements (*kleśa-kṛta-rūpa-vikāra*) corresponds to reading others’ minds.

These scholastic texts propose that meditative mastery of various objects of meditation, combined with other components of the focused mind, like a firm mental resolution, can give one the power to manipulate reality in various ways. Through specifically prescribed meditative techniques, one gains mastery over the basic elements. Mastery over the mind and the mental realms of existence translates into power over the basic elements that constitute the three levels of the Buddhist universe, the desire realm (*kāma-dhātu*), the realm of subtle form (*rūpa-dhātu*) and formless realm (*arūpa-dhātu*). In the *Abhidharmakośa*, for instance, Vasubandhu mentions that the sphere of application for superhuman powers of creation is the realms of desire and subtle form, because only these realms involve form.<sup>50</sup> The means of acquisition and the sphere of application of the various types of superhuman power thus both remain within the realm of cause and effect.

Buddhist literature does not often cite examples of superhuman powers being limited by other “natural forces.” One rare example is found in the story of the death of Moggallāna, the monk famous for having the greatest superhuman powers of all the Buddha’s disciples. Despite his superhuman powers, Moggallāna is unable to escape from a violent death by beating. It turns out that the beating is the result of a sin committed in a past life. Apparently, in a past life, Moggallāna had beaten his own parents, to death in some versions of the story.

In any case, by means of his superhuman powers, Moggallāna in this life successfully escapes several times from brigands hired to kill him. However, when they come a final time, Moggallāna finds that he is unable to fly away, grounded by the force of his previous evil deed. In an alternate version of the story, Moggallāna appears to sense the pull of the bad karma, and thus makes no attempt to get away. This alternative explanation seems to reduce the tension between the power of karma and superhuman powers, but the prior version seems quite explicit that the power of karma is greater even than the superhuman powers of mighty Moggallāna.

Thus, at least in this story, it seems that superhuman powers are limited by the power of karma, one of the causal factors that explain reality.<sup>51</sup> Explanations of the acquisition and use of superhuman powers also rely on theories about gaining meditative mastery over basic elements of nature. For these reasons, it is unclear to what extent one should describe superhuman powers as “supernatural,” despite the fact that such powers illustrate the law of mind over matter. As we have seen, however, the very notion of supernaturalism, or violation of natural law, is problematic for some contemporary philosophers of religion. As we will see in the next section, however, Buddhist literature makes a distinction between common and noble types of superhuman power, a distinction

that parallels another between mundane and transcendent or transmundane powers. These distinctions are also relevant to the issue of describing superhuman powers as supernatural or not.

### Common and Noble, Mundane and “Transcendent”

These two sets of opposing terms, which parallel each other, offer another way of conceiving the relationship among the different constituents of awakening and goals achievable on the Buddhist path. Like the four noble truths and the noble eight-fold path, noble superhuman powers are “noble” (*ariya*, *ārya*), because they are possessed by the “Noble Ones,” the Buddha and his eminent “disciples” (*sāvaka*, *srāvaka*). The distinction between “noble” and “common” or “ordinary” (*an-ariya*, *an-ārya*) is a common one. Thus it is unsurprising to find it also used to distinguish types of “superhuman power” (*iddhi*, *rddhi*).<sup>52</sup> The *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-śāstra*, *Paṭisambhidāmagga*, *Visuddhimagga*, and *Śrāvakabhūmi* all make reference to “noble” superhuman powers.

One important Pāli text of the *Dīgha-nikāya* could be the main source for the distinction as it is found in the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* and *Visuddhimagga*. In the *Sampasādanīya-sutta*, “common” superhuman powers refer to those of the standardized list of superhuman powers that should be familiar by now: multiplication, levitation, walking on water, and so forth. They are called common, the text says, because they are not free of the “defilements” (P: *āsava*, Skt: *āśrava*) and “attachments” (*upadhi*). In contrast, noble superhuman power is free from defilements and attachments.

The *Sampasādanīya-sutta* describes this superhuman power of the Noble Ones in this way:



Now, if a monk wishes, “May I abide perceiving as attractive what is repulsive,” he dwells there perceiving [it] as attractive. If a monk wishes, “May I abide perceiving as repulsive what is attractive,” he dwells there perceiving [it] as repulsive. If a monk wishes, “May I abide perceiving as attractive what is both repulsive and attractive,” he dwells there so perceiving it. If a monk wishes, “May I abide perceiving as repulsive what is both repulsive and attractive,” and he dwells there so perceiving it. If a monk wishes, “May I abide attentive and aware in equanimity having gotten rid of conceptions of what is repulsive, attractive or both,” so he abides in equanimity attentive and aware.<sup>53</sup>

This description is quoted verbatim in the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* and found also in the *Mahāprajñāpāramitāsāstra*.<sup>54</sup> The *Visuddhimagga* clarifies that this equanimity of mind is called the *iddhi* (achievement, success, superhuman power) of the Noble Ones, because it is possessed only by the Noble Ones.<sup>55</sup> What the Noble Ones possess that others do not is the attainment of cessation of rebirth, that is, *nirvāṇa*. The detachment and equanimity characteristic of noble superhuman power seems to suggest the path to *nirvāṇa*. Although there are other types listed among the ten types of superhuman power in the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* and *Visuddhimagga* that also refer to the path to the achievement of *nirvāṇa*,<sup>56</sup> the superhuman power of the Noble Ones seems to particularly concern the attainment of *nirvāṇa*. This connection between *nirvāṇa* and noble superhuman power can be seen more clearly in another text that uses the dichotomy between noble and common.

The dichotomy between the noble (that which is deathless, pure, free from rebirth, etc.) and the common (that which is subject to death, attachment, rebirth, etc.) provides the “Discourse on the Noble Quest” (*ariya-pariyesanā-sutta*), an alternate version of the Buddha’s biography, with its basic discursive structure.<sup>57</sup> After defining the “common” or “ignoble” (*an-ariya, anārya*) quest as one in which people seek what is impermanent

and liable to sorrow, such as family and property, the text describes the Noble Quest (*ariya-pariyesana*) as that which leads to *nibbāna*.

Significant events in the Buddha's final lifetime are then briefly recounted, from the renunciation of the household life to the awakening and first sermon. The language used to describe the awakening in this discourse does not include any reference to the three types of knowledge or the six superpowers. Superhuman powers are nowhere mentioned. Instead, the story focuses exclusively on the attainment of *nirvāṇa*, which is described as the deathless state, free from sorrow, and the "supreme comfort from the bonds [of attachment]" (*anuttara yogakkhema*).

In addition to the dichotomy between noble and common, Buddhist literature also contains a parallel opposition between the "mundane" or "worldly" (P: *lokiya*, *lokika*; Skt: *laukika*) and the "transmundane" or "transcendent" (P: *lokuttara*, Skt: *lokottara*). The parallel between the common/noble dichotomy and that between mundane and transcendent is apparent when one compares the *Sampadanīya-sutta* with the *Śrāvakabhūmi*. The *Śrāvakabhūmi* says that only two paths are available to the ascetic (*yogin*) who has reached a preliminary level of meditative concentration: the mundane path (*laukika-mārga*) and the transcendent path (*lokottara-mārga*).<sup>58</sup>

The *Śrāvakabhūmi*, like other Buddhist texts, characterizes the first five superpowers as the fruit of the "mundane" (*laukika*) path.<sup>59</sup> We have already seen how the *Śrāvakabhūmi* describes the acquisition of the first five superpowers. The worldly or mundane path consists of the practice of the four meditations (*dhyāna*) and the four contemplations (*samāpatti*). Through meditative practice, one acquires the five mundane superpowers.

According to the *Śrāvakabhūmi*, however, meditative concentration on the “liberations” (*vimokṣa*), “masteries” (*abhibhu-āyatana*) and “objects of total concentration” (*kr̥tsna-āyatana*) generates what the text calls “noble superhuman powers” (*ārya-ṛddhi*).<sup>60</sup> This type of superhuman power is described as the fruit of the transmundane or transcendent path, and is considered to be equivalent to the “sixth superpower,” the knowledge of the nature of reality and the self-authenticating knowledge that the defilements have been destroyed.

In order to achieve true freedom from future rebirth, one must follow what is called the “transcendent” or “transmundane” path. The transcendent path consists specifically in contemplating the four noble truths through which the ascetic comes to know the nature of reality as it is (*yathābhūtam prajānāti*).<sup>61</sup> It leads to sainthood, knowledge that the defilements have been destroyed, correct knowledge of the nature of reality, and ultimately freedom from rebirth. *Lokottara* literally means what is beyond the world. This transcendent path is also known as the Noble path (*ariya-magga, ārya-mārga*) to *nibbāna*.<sup>62</sup>

Although one can manipulate the basic elements that constitute the worldly and heavenly spheres through the various types of superhuman powers, variously classified as powers of resolution, motion, transformation, creation, and so forth, one cannot necessarily escape from the various realms of rebirth through the acquisition and use of these types of superhuman powers.<sup>63</sup> Therefore, it seems apt to call them “mundane.”

In the context of its discussion of the common or mundane path by which one might achieve the five mundane superpowers, the *Śrāvakabhūmi* also invokes the distinction between noble and ordinary types of superhuman power.<sup>64</sup> The text draws the distinction in this way:

With noble superhuman powers, whatever object one transforms, whatever magical creation one creates, and whatever one resolves to do, it really happens. Every thing [that he produces] is able to perform its [proper] function. On the other hand, [what is produced] with ordinary [superhuman powers] is not real, but appears instead like a magician's show.

The *Śrāvakabhūmi* says that noble superhuman powers apply to powers of transformation of objects (*vastupariṇāmikī*), powers of magical creation (*nairmāṇikī*), and powers of resolution (*ādhimokṣikī*), but the example given here seems to apply mostly to a case of powers of transformation or creation.<sup>65</sup>

We can see that the distinction drawn here is dissimilar from that made between noble and ordinary types of superhuman power in other texts. However, it is also apparent that it is a form of the general attempt to distinguish the Noble Ones from those who are merely ordinary. What we see here is that the noble ones are capable of true mastery over nature, whereas ordinary people can only produce “magical illusions.” The rhetoric here is somewhat similar to the distinction sometimes drawn in Buddhist literature between miracles and magic.

The passage concludes by saying that the ascetic generates the five superpowers and the “noble qualities” not shared with ordinary people through assiduous practice of meditation by means of the twelve conceptions or ideas. The implication here seems to be that these noble qualities are somehow different from the five superpowers. When discussing the acquisition of the “noble superhuman powers” related to transformation, magical creation and resolution, the *Śrāvakabhūmi* passage adds that the ascetic also acquires “dispassion” (*araṇā*), “knowledge arising from the vow” (*pranidhijñāna*), and “the [four types of] analytical knowledge (*pratisamvid*) through meditation on the conceptions of the liberations, masteries, and objects of total concentration.

These attainments are not really superhuman powers, but they are commonly associated with the achievement of sainthood.<sup>66</sup> In the *Abhidharmakośa*, all these attainments are included in a list of qualities, some of which the Buddhas share with the other noble ones and some that ordinary people also possess. In his subcommentary on the *Abhidharmakośa*, Yaśomitra clearly states that dispassion, knowledge arising from the vow, and analytical knowledge are attainments that the Buddha shares only with the other noble ones. Ordinary people do not possess them. However, the list also includes the superpowers (*abhijñā*), the levels of meditative concentration (*dhyāna*), and various other attainments, included the eight liberations, the eight masteries and the ten objects of total concentration. These ordinary people may possess.<sup>67</sup> It is unclear precisely how or when the *Śrāvakabhūmi*'s discussion of noble superhuman powers was grafted into its discussion of superpowers and the mundane path, but its presence in the text as we have it seems to be proof of the continuing issue of how to distinguish between Buddhist sainthood and awakening and the various types of superhuman powers available to non-Buddhists.

The significance of the notion of noble superhuman power is not only in the opposition between attachment and detachment, but also in the distinction between those who possess it and those who do not. Noble superhuman power is possessed by the Noble Ones, those who are freed from suffering and rebirth and who are often described in Buddhist texts as “saints” (*arahant*, *arhat*). In contrast, those who are not freed from suffering and rebirth and remain attached to the mundane world are classified as common (*anāriya*, *anārya*) or ordinary (*puṭhujjana*, *prthagjana*). It does not matter whether they are other human beings, gods or some other type of being. They all remain subject to

rebirth. This distinction between noble and common thus implies a basic division in the types of beings conceptualized in Buddhist discourse.

The Buddha and all others that are considered to be in the Buddhist “nobility” are placed atop a hierarchy of beings. There is also a hierarchy among Noble Ones and atop that hierarchy sits the Buddha. The *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-śāstra*, for instance, implies these hierarchies when it describes the superhuman power of the Noble Ones as sovereign power, and notes that only the Buddha possesses it in full. The *Sampasādanīya-sutta* may also imply a hierarchy when it says that “ascetics or Brahmins” (*samaṇo vā brāhmaṇo vā*) can possess the common or ignoble types of superhuman powers—the classical list of various types of superhuman power—while “Buddhist monks” (*bhikkhu, bhikṣu*) possess the superhuman powers of the noble ones. The next section of this chapter will discuss some of the hierarchies of beings implied by the Buddhist discourse on miracles and superhuman powers

### Hierarchies of Beings

There are numerous ways in which Buddhist literature illustrates the hierarchies among various types of beings. Indeed, this seems to be an implicit part of the larger Buddhist discourse on miracles and superhuman powers, a discourse concerned with showing the superiority of the Buddha. When the Buddha defeats the rival ascetics at Śrāvastī, this demonstrates his superiority. When Piṇḍola Bhāradvaja flies up to retrieve a sandalwood bowl, the fact that he is a disciple of the Buddha means that his display of superhuman power demonstrates the superiority of the Buddhist path despite the fact that

he is criticized for his display. The story makes it clear that the other rival ascetics who covet the bowl could not fly to up to get it. Moreover, when the *Kevaṭṭa-sutta* or the *Abhidharmakośa* argues that teaching the Dharma is the best kind of miracle, the claim seems to be part of a more complex argument about the superiority of the Buddha. The story that concludes the *Kevaṭṭa-sutta* serves this purpose by illustrating some of the range of heavenly beings that exist in the world, and that the Buddha is superior even to the greatest of the gods.

In the *Dhammapada* commentary version of the miracles at Śrāvastī, the hierarchy of beings is also an implicit part of the crescendo of miracles that affirms the superiority of the Buddha. Just as the Buddha senses that the time has come to perform the miracle, a laywoman disciple of the Buddha named Gharaṇī approaches and offers to perform a miracle in his stead. The Buddha asks her what kind of miracle she would perform, and Gharaṇī responds by describing a miracle in which she would transform the world into water and dive in only to reappear at the northern, southern, eastern and western edges. She concludes by saying, “The crowd will ask, ‘Who is that?’ and others will answer ‘That is Gharaṇī. If such is the wondrous power (anubhāva) of a mere woman, then what must be the wondrous power of the Buddha!’” The Buddha accepts that Gharaṇī has the power to perform a miracle such as she describes, but declines her request, saying that “this basket of flowers” has not been prepared for her.<sup>68</sup>

Next, the layman disciple, Culla Anāthapiṇḍika, approaches and requests to perform the miracle in the Buddha’s stead. After describing his miracle, the Buddha again affirms his ability to perform it and declines. Then, a seven year old female novice named Cīrā approaches. The same thing occurs. Next a male novice named Cunda comes forward and describes his miracle. Again, his request is denied. He is then followed by

Utpalavaṇṇā, the nun whose superhuman powers are elsewhere proclaimed by the Buddha to be the greatest among all the nuns. Finally, Moggallāna, whose superhuman powers are the greatest of all the monks, approaches and makes his own request, which is denied just as all the others were.

The specific ordering of persons here is important for the way in which it implicates a hierarchy of beings, with men superior to women, monks superior to nuns, and the fully ordained monks and nuns superior to mere novices. Utpalavaṇṇā is the greatest of the nuns, and Moggallāna the greatest of the monks, except only for the Buddha. Moreover, even the “lowliest” of the Buddha’s followers who has achieved superhuman powers is clearly established as superior to the rival ascetics and others. Though the Buddha’s disciples do not actually perform their miracles, their descriptions of them are enough to build up the crescendo to the point at which the Buddha actually performs his miracle.

A hierarchy is also apparent in distinctions that are drawn between the various types of superhuman powers themselves. The possession of superhuman powers acquired through meditation is one way of distinguishing the Buddha and his eminent disciples from non-Buddhists who may possess superhuman powers through some type of magical charm. Moreover, we have seen how the *Śrāvakabhūmi* distinguishes between the mere illusions of the magician and acts of the Noble Ones, who can create real things with their superhuman powers. Recall that the *Mahāvibhāṣā* classifies superhuman powers into three types: powers of transportation of the body by means of levitation, powers of resolve, and powers of the speed of mind (*manojavā*). There is an implicit hierarchy among these powers. Traveling at the speed of mind is obviously faster than flying by means of levitating one’s body. According to the text, only the Buddha can travel by



mind speed. The so-called “independently awakened” (*paccekabuddha*, *pratyekabuddha*) can acquire both levitation and the powers of resolve, while the Buddha’s “disciples” (*śrāvakas*) can only achieve the power of levitating their bodies. In this way, the *Mahāvibhāṣā* establishes a hierarchy among these types of beings.

It seems that distinguishing among the various types of flight is a popular method for drawing hierarchical distinctions among the types of beings, apparent in both narrative and scholastic literature. In his comparative study of miracles of walking on water, W. Norman Brown claims that the Buddha always flies through the air, while his lesser disciples and devotees may sometimes walk on the water.<sup>69</sup> John Strong has pointed out several other ways in which the superiority of the Buddha is marked through distinctions in the types of levitation, including a fine example from the *Pūrṇāvadāna* where the Buddha’s disciples first arrive riding upon giant eagles, flying tigers and all sorts of flying vehicles, while the Buddha arrives last flying with his legs crossed, supported only by means of his own superhuman power.<sup>70</sup>

As we can see, there are many different ways in which the superiority of the Buddha may be established, and there does not seem to be one consistent method of doing so. Although the Buddha invariably stands atop the hierarchy of beings, beings line up beneath the Buddha in a number of different ways. Just beneath the Buddha seem to be the “independently awakened.” They also achieve full and complete awakening, but do not share the Buddha’s teaching mission. Moggallāna appears to come next, followed by the other eminent disciples and Arhats who have acquired the six superpowers. Spreading out below the eminent disciples are various others who possess superhuman powers. Interestingly, in the story of the miracles at Śrāvastī, young novice monks and

nuns, and even laymen and laywomen, seem to possess superhuman powers, a fact that seems to distinguish them from the non-Buddhist rivals.

As the Bodhisattva ideal was developed and made a more central theme, especially in Mahāyāna Buddhist literature, the figure of the Bodhisattva was added to the hierarchy of Buddhist holy persons. The Bodhisattva is likened to the Buddha to the extent that the advanced Bodhisattvas in Mahāyāna literature often seem more or less equivalent to the Buddhas. Mahāyāna literature also emphasizes the superiority of the Bodhisattvas over the stereotyped figures of the disciples and Arhats.

While all Buddhas are Arhats, not all Arhats are Buddhas.<sup>71</sup> Despite the fact that the disciples are also Arhats, there is more to Buddhahood than achieving the minimum requirements for becoming an Arhat. Recall the distinction made in the *Śrāvakabhūmi* between the superhuman powers of the Noble Ones, who produce illusions that are real, and those of the magician, whose illusions are unreal. In the *Divyāvadāna* version of the miracle of Śrāvastī, however, the Buddha performs a version of the twin miracle, similar to that in the *Dhammapada* commentary version, but afterwards declares that such miracles are common to all the disciples of the Buddha. The Buddha then proceeds to perform the “great miracle” in which Buddha replicas fill the sky, ostensibly displaying a miracle that only Buddhas can perform.<sup>72</sup> In this and other ways, the Buddha is distinguished from the disciples.

In the *Abhidharmakośa*, among the many qualities (*dharmas*) that define the Buddha are certain powers (*prabhāva*).<sup>73</sup> The *Bodhisattvabhūmi* refers to a set of powers similar to those in the *Abhidharmakośa* and claims that they are possessed by both Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. According to the *Bodhisattvabhūmi*, Buddhas and Bodhisattvas possess five kinds of power

This [power] of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, when analyzed into type, is fivefold: 1) power [in the sense of the] superpowers (*abhijñā*), 2) power [in the sense of] the qualities (*dharma-prabhāva*), 3) inherent power (*sahaja-prabhāva*), 4) [power] that is shared (*sādhāraṇa*) with the disciples and the independently awakened ones, and 5) [power] that is not shared (*asādhāraṇa*) [with them].

The six superpowers are classified as the first type of power. The *Bodhisattvabhūmi* also describes the first type of power as the power of the Noble ones.<sup>74</sup>

The power of the qualities refers to the power produced by perfecting the six perfect virtues (*pāramitā*). The text explains, “In regard [to the second type of power], there are six perfections: giving, moral virtue, patience, courage, meditation, and wisdom. [These] are called qualities (*dharma*). The majestic power (*anubhāva*) of these qualities is called the power of the qualities.” Inherent power refers to “marvelous and fantastic qualities (*āścārya-adbhuta-dharma*), inherent (*sahaja*) in the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, resulting from the accumulation of the requisites (*saṃbhāra*) [for awakening] due to great merit in the past.” Both of these types of power, and the broader classification of types of powers more generally, shows that Buddhist scholastic classifications do seem to attempt to define the nature of a Buddha by means of the certain powers, and that they acknowledge that there is more to a Buddha than simply the possession of the six superpowers. As one sees here, one must also take in to account the wondrous, powerful presence (*anubhāva*) and the marvelous and fantastic qualities (*āścārya-adbhuta-dharma*) inherent in the Buddha as a result of practicing the perfect virtues and building up merit.

When it comes to distinguishing the powers of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas from those of the disciples and independently awakened ones, the *Bodhisattvabhūmi* discusses the difference in three aspects. Firstly, it says, Buddhas and Bodhisattvas know

the activity of countless, innumerable beings as it is in reality, through countless, innumerable means of deploying the powers. This is called the subtle difference. Secondly, it says, Buddhas and Bodhisattvas possess the power that is the superpowers, the power that is the qualities, and the inherent power in all their aspects. This is called the difference according to aspect.

Finally, it says, the power of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas can be distinguished from that of the disciples and independently awakened ones by means of the sphere of influence of their powers. Whereas the sphere of influence of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas contains all the universes and worlds where beings live, the disciples' and independently awakened ones' spheres of influence are limited to a single world system or part of it. This limitation is due to the fact that the disciples and independently awakened ones only succeed in mastering themselves. They do not seek to free all sentient beings, like the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas do.

Among the types of superhuman knowledge and power, we have seen that the knowledge that one's defilements have been destroyed (the third knowledge or sixth superpower) is often said to be the unique property of the noble ones, that is, the Buddha and his eminent disciples.<sup>75</sup> According to texts like the *Śrāvakaḥūmi* and *Visuddhimagga*, this is the fruit of the transmundane or transcendent path. It sets the Buddha and his eminent disciples apart from others by privileging the attainment of freedom from rebirth and correct knowledge of the nature of reality.

In Mahāyāna Buddhist literature, however, the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are often valorized precisely because they choose to remain within the realm of rebirth for the sake of sentient beings. This poses an interesting dilemma for a hierarchy of beings based on the classification of superhuman knowledge and power. Often, in discussions of

the different types of superpower that the Bodhisattva possesses, the sixth is simply left out. Since the Bodhisattva remains within the realm of rebirth, the Bodhisattva acquires only the first five, so-called mundane superpowers. It might seem that leaving out the sixth superpower puts the Bodhisattva on the lower level than that of the Noble ones. Mahāyāna texts go to lengths to explain that the Bodhisattva is superior to the disciples despite not possessing the sixth superpower.

Quoting from a text it calls “The Meditation Sūtra,” the *Mahāprajñāpāramitāśāstra* records an alternate ordering of the superpowers that seems meant to address this issue. Instead of being listed first as normally is the case, the various types of superhuman powers are listed last. Explaining the reason for placing superhuman power last, the text says that superhuman powers enable the Bodhisattva to save many people. The number of people that can be saved with the other five is few, because they do not include the power to produce magical displays. Therefore, superhuman powers are placed last. This minor alteration of the ordering of the superpowers is one way of arguing for the superiority of the Bodhisattva by emphasizing the goal of saving others over the attainment of personal liberation.

Even if they want to avoid the conclusion that a Bodhisattva might attain freedom from rebirth before becoming a Buddha, Mahāyāna texts still want to claim that the Bodhisattva possesses correct knowledge of the nature of reality and the ability to teach the Dharma. In regard to the knowledge of the destruction of the defilements, the *Bodhisattvabhūmi* has this to say:

Regarding the Buddhas’ and Bodhisattvas’ knowledge of the destruction of the defilements, the Buddha or Bodhisattva knows in reality that the destruction of the defilements has been achieved. [He thinks,] “The destruction of the defilements has been achieved by me and not by others.” He knows in reality the means of achieving the destruction of the

defilements for himself and for others. Thus, he knows in reality what is the means and what is not the means. When he has achieved destruction of the defilements, he knows in reality other beings' pride. He knows in reality other beings' lack of pride. The Bodhisattva, moreover, knows all this, but he does not himself realize the destruction of the defilements. The Bodhisattva does not abandon things [connected] with the defilements. Therefore, he lives among things connected with the defilements.<sup>76</sup>

Here one sees the tendency to attribute some of the knowledge and power associated with the sixth superpower to the Bodhisattva without including cessation of rebirth.

In the same vein, perhaps, the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-śāstra* speaks of two types of knowledge of the destruction of the defilements. On the one hand, it says, there is simultaneous destruction of the defilements and their "latent impressions" (*vāsanā*), which are caused by past actions. On the other hand, there can be destruction of the defilements without the latent impressions being destroyed. When one speaks of the Bodhisattva possessing the five superpowers, according to the text, one is speaking about the Bodhisattva who possesses the second type, in which the latent impressions are not destroyed. When both are destroyed, one speaks of the Bodhisattva established in the six superpowers. At that time, the passage concludes, the Bodhisattva would be a Buddha.

### Conclusion

The focus of the discussion in this chapter shifted from typologies of miracles to classifications of the various types of superhuman knowledge and power. Miracles and superhuman powers are connected in the broader Buddhist discourse on the miraculous, a point made explicitly by Vasubandhu, but already apparent in the fact that the Buddha's awakening is included among the great miracles or wondrous and amazing events in the last life of the Buddha.

Yet, there is a tension that underlies the Buddhist discourse on miracles and superhuman powers. It manifests in the contrast between the miraculous displays of superhuman powers and teaching the Dharma. We have seen this tension reiterated in the contrast between the first and the sixth types of superpower, namely, between the various types of superhuman powers on the one hand, and on the other, the knowledge that one's defilements have been destroyed, which confers correct understanding of the nature of reality. This tension appears to concern the place of superhuman powers as constituents of the Buddha's awakening, and the place of displays of superhuman power among the activities of the Buddha's ministry.

A tension is sometimes also apparent in the contrast between meditation and knowledge, the former being the basis for the acquisition of superhuman powers and the latter leading to *nirvāṇa*.<sup>77</sup> The Buddhist tradition seems generally to have maintained that meditation is a prerequisite for correctly understanding the nature of reality. The commonly expressed position is: "The 'concentrated' (*samāhita*) [mind, person] knows reality as it truly is (*yathābhūtaṃ*)."<sup>78</sup> Yet, it was also deemed possible to achieve freedom (*vimutti*, *vimukti*), that is, status as a saint and assurance of *nirvāṇa* at death, without acquiring extraordinary powers. Such saints are called "freed by wisdom" (*paññā-vimutta*, *prajñā-vimukta*), sometimes also known as "dry-wisdom saints" (*sukha-vipassaka-*, *śuṣka-*). In these cases, only a moment of meditative concentration would seem to be required, not the longer amount of meditative training required for acquisition of the superhuman powers.

The theoretical possibility of achieving a type of awakening, and the concomitant freedom from rebirth at the end of the present lifetime, shows clearly that some Buddhists believed awakening (or *nirvāṇa*) and superhuman powers to be separate things. On the

opposite end of the spectrum, however, we have seen some Mahāyāna Buddhist discussions arguing that the Bodhisattva can achieve correct understanding of the nature of reality without actually achieving the destruction of the defilements that would lead to the cessation of rebirth. Instead, the Bodhisattva remains in the realm of rebirth to cultivate superhuman power and knowledge in order to save more beings. We will see in the next chapter how the inconceivable nature of the Bodhisattva's freedom allows the Bodhisattva to manifest in the realm of rebirth while partly remaining beyond the mundane realm.

The distinction between mundane and transmundane types of superhuman powers, which parallels that between the ignoble and noble, suggests another way in which Buddhists tried to distinguish the Buddha and his awakening from various mundane attainments. Given that superhuman powers, howsoever attained, seem to be theoretically achievable by Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike, the Buddhist discourse on miracles and superhuman powers is concerned to show how the Buddha and his eminent disciples are superior. Although one way of emphasizing the superiority of the Buddha and the eminent disciples is to deemphasize the significance of superhuman powers, another way of doing so merely emphasizes that the Buddha is superior in terms of raw superhuman power. His powers are simply deemed to be greater than those of the rest. It would seem then that Buddhists also distinguished among various levels in the hierarchy of beings based on the type, source, and relative strength of various beings' superhuman powers.



<sup>1</sup> Luis Gómez questions the applicability of the Western terms eschatology and soteriology to Buddhism. See Gómez 1998: 30. The issue is not dissimilar from the general problem one faces in using terms with specific technical meaning in Western religious contexts in non-Western contexts. One may use such terms, but one needs to be aware of the limitations of language. In any case, instead of using eschatology and soteriology, I opt to speak more simply of the goals of the Buddhist path.

<sup>2</sup> The *Lalitavistara* or “Extensive [Account of the Buddha’s] Legendary Activity” is a longer biography of the Buddha, based on earlier material, which covers the period of time from the conception to the first sermon. Editions are extant in Sanskrit and Tibetan. For Sanskrit, see Lefmann 1977.

<sup>3</sup> M i.22ff, i.117ff, i.247ff, ii.93ff. M i.167ff also contains a brief account of the Awakening that does not include the three *vijjās*.

<sup>4</sup> M i.22.

<sup>5</sup> M i.22.

<sup>6</sup> As we saw, the *Catuṣpariṣat-sūtra* was likely an independently circulating text that closely parallels a narrative segment that is contained in the *vinaya* collections of various Buddhist traditions. This narrative segment begins just after the awakening and covers the events up to the conversion of the two most eminent disciples, Śāripūtra and Maudgalyāyana. The *Catuṣpariṣat-sūtra* most closely parallels the version of these events contained in the *Mūlasarvāstivāda vinaya*. None of the *vinaya* versions begin with the awakening. Since the *Catuṣpariṣat-sūtra* was probably an independently circulating text, it stands to reason that a brief description of the awakening was prefixed in order to make a more unified and complete narrative.

<sup>7</sup> Traité, vol. 4, p. 1824.

<sup>8</sup> Lopez 1992: 24-26.

<sup>9</sup> D i.63-88. Although the descriptions are more or less identical to other descriptions, the six superpowers are not explicitly so called in the text.

<sup>10</sup> AKBh: 869. Kośa, vol. 5, p. 110.

<sup>11</sup> Although not listed among the three “powers” (*vijjā*), a specific list of “superhuman powers” (P: *iddhi*, Skt: *ṛddhi*) is the first of the six “superpowers” (*abhiññā*). The third *abhiññā* is the ability to read others’ minds. Included are the power to remember all one’s previous lives and a rather vague ability called the “divine eye” that involves an intimate, synchronic awareness of the continuous births and deaths of beings in the world.

<sup>12</sup> It is also connected to *vid-* in the sense of to find. See MW.

<sup>13</sup> The notion of three Buddhist “knowledges” also plays off the meaning of the terms in the orthodox Brahmanic tradition, where the three *vidyās* refer to the three Vedas. Of course, the Vedas are not merely objective knowledge either, but knowledge that has an effective capacity when properly used.

<sup>14</sup> The *Kevaṭṭa-sutta* mentions two different *vijjās*, which were given as possible causes of certain miraculous displays of superhuman power.

<sup>15</sup> See citations in La Vallée Poussin 1908.

<sup>16</sup> Although I concede that using superhuman power and superpower for *ṛddhi* is subjective preference to some degree, I feel that my translation choices speak to modern English usage in a way that others do not. Just as the meanings of *ṛddhi* and *abhiññā* overlap, superpower and superhuman power both evoke extraordinary powers of various kinds, powers that are associated in popular American discourse with those of superheroes (and super-villains), and with great athletes. Like the Buddhist conception of the *ṛddhi*, these powers can be caused in a variety of different ways that do not necessarily fall outside the processes of the natural world. A web search for “superhuman powers” and “Tiger Woods” will yield a variety of instances, including the intriguing website: [www.tigerwoodsismgod.com](http://www.tigerwoodsismgod.com). More recently, Michael Phelps achievements have been described by some as “superhuman.”

<sup>17</sup> AKBh: 870; Kośa, vol. 5, p. 112.

<sup>18</sup> Although the Buddhist terms derive from *ardh-*, to grow, they have sometimes been confused with another common Sanskrit term for superhuman powers, *siddhi*, from *sidh-*, to accomplish, fulfill or acquire. There are many instances of this confusion. See, for instance, Davis 1998. W. N. Brown cites some of the synonyms for *ṛddhi* in his work on the miracles of walking on water. See Brown 1928.

<sup>19</sup> Narrative examples of this are numerous. In a few stories, monks even lose their power to fly by having their trance interrupted. John Strong discusses some of these stories in his article, “When Magical Flight Fails.” See Strong, 1983 [2008].

<sup>20</sup> D ii.177-8. Same list at M iii.176. Compare with J iii.454 for another set.

<sup>21</sup> A i.145.

<sup>22</sup> M i.152ff.

<sup>23</sup> The *Visuddhimagga* say that “great power” in this case refers to the ability of the sun and moon to illuminate three of the four continents and “great majesty” refers to the fact that they move at an altitude of 42 thousand leagues. Vsm: 335. Ñāṇamoli 1999: 393.

<sup>24</sup> I have made the choice to divide the powers into eight classes. So far as I am aware, they are nowhere called the eight types of superhuman power. They are simply called the various types (*anekavihita*) of superhuman power. If one were to separate each of the first two powers, one would end up with a list of ten. The PTS Dictionary seems to count to ten, but I haven’t seen a Buddhist text that calls these the ten powers. However, there is a different, much broader classification of ten types of *iddhi* listed in the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* and *Visuddhimagga*.

<sup>25</sup> Traité, vol. 4, 1809ff.

<sup>26</sup> Psm ii.209-210. Vsm: 338-339.

<sup>27</sup> Vsm: 323. Ñāṇamoli 1999: 379. *Iti imāsu dasasu iddhīsu iddhividhāyāti imasmim̐ pade adhiṭṭhānā iddhiyeva āgatā. Imasmim̐ panatthe vikubbanāmanomayā iddhiyopi icchitabbā eva.*

<sup>28</sup> D i.78

<sup>29</sup> DA i.223

<sup>30</sup> T 1545: 725 b23-c4. Cited and translated by Lamotte. See Traité, Vol. 4: 1819. The precise Sanskrit terminology comes from the parallel classification found in the AKBh.

<sup>31</sup> *Adhimokṣa* (P: *adhimokkha*) and *adhiṣṭhāna* (P: *adhiṭṭhāna*) are often used synonymously. Therefore, it is interesting that *adhimokṣa* is found as one type of *ṛddhi* in the Sanskrit scholastic sources, while *adhiṭṭhāna* is found as one of the types of *iddhi* in the Pali scholastic sources.

<sup>32</sup> This is a common trope found throughout Buddhist literature.

<sup>33</sup> It would appear from Lamotte’s translation that the *Vibhāṣā* means to classify the ability to appear and disappear under the power of resolve, as well. While the length of time it takes for a strongman to bend or straighten his arm is quite short, it is perhaps not as short as the speed of mind.

<sup>34</sup> The *Mahāvibhāṣā* and *Abhidharmakośa* both present these powers in a hierarchy. Only the Buddha has mind-speed, while the disciples (*śrāvaka*) and certain independently enlightened (*pratyekabuddha*) saints also possess the first two. See below.

<sup>35</sup> This is a type of miraculous power that would play a part in many other miracles, including several of the miracles in the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, the miracle of the chairs and the miraculous feast, for instance.

<sup>36</sup> *Nirmāṇa*, like *māyā*, derives from *mā-*, to measure, to fabricate, to create. *Māyā* may mean an illusion, or it may even refer to reality as the cosmic illusion. *Māyākāra* is another word for magician, a creator of magical illusions. *Māyā* and *nirmāṇa* are sometimes used synonymously in Mahāyāna Buddhist texts in the sense of an illusion.

<sup>37</sup> The Pāli term is not common. It is found, for instance, in the phrase, *issara-nimmāna-hetu*, “caused by the creation of a Supreme God.” This phrase occurs in the refutation of the doctrines of the Jains: “If the pleasure and pain that beings feel are caused by the creation of a Supreme God, then the Nigaṇṭhas (i.e. the Jains) surely must have been created by an evil Supreme God, since they now feel such painful, tortuous, piercing feelings.” (M ii.222)

<sup>38</sup> An interesting use of *nimmāna* in the Pāli Canon occurs in the *Bramajāla-sutta* of the *Dīgha-nikāya*, where Brahmā, the first God to appear at the beginning of this world, mistakenly thinks that the other beings that appear are created (*nimmāna*) by him, because he makes a wish for there to be other beings. (D i.18) In the *Sāmaññaphala-sutta*, the term, *animmita*, “uncreated,” is used in the description of the rival ascetic Pakudha Kaccāyana’s theory that seven things (the four elements, pleasure, pain, and the life principle) are uncreated. Commenting on this passage, the Pāli commentary oddly says that these things are not created by means of superhuman power (*iddhi*). (DA i.167) At the least, this passage in the commentary confirms the awareness on the part of the Pāli commentators (at least by the 5<sup>th</sup> century C.E.) of the connection between “creation” and superhuman power.

<sup>39</sup> Bbh: 44. Cited by Edgerton in BHSD under *nirmāṇa*.

<sup>40</sup> Traité, vol 4: 1820.

<sup>41</sup> One can achieve rebirth as a god or divine being in one of the various heavens through the practice of the mundane meditative states, in which case certain types of superhuman power would come “naturally.” In addition to those types already discussed, the ten-fold classification of superhuman powers in the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* and *Visuddhimagga* also includes “superhuman power produced by the ripening the

action” (*kammavipākaja*) and “superhuman power of those possessing merit” (*puññavata*). Superhuman powers produced by the ripening of past action refer, for instance, to the ability to fly on the part of birds, gods, goddesses, spirits, and other celestial creatures. Similarly, the superhuman power of those possessing merit is said to refer to the power of universal monarch to fly along with his four-fold army. Furthermore, as we have already seen, superhuman powers may be acquired by those who gain possession of some kind of magical spell or amulet (*vijjā, vidyā*). The *Paṭisambhidāmagga* and *Visuddhimagga* both include “superhuman power consisting of magic” (*vijjāmayā*) among the ten types of superhuman power. Such instances were also mentioned by the *Kevaṭṭa-sutta* as one of the reasons perhaps to doubt the authenticity of a miraculous display of superhuman power. Such people are sometimes called magicians (*vijjādhara, vidyādhara*) or illusionists (*māyākara*).

<sup>42</sup> John Strong discusses a number of these stories in his article, “When Magical Flight Fails.” See Strong 1983 [2008]. John Strong makes the interesting argument that such stories of the failure of superhuman powers, perhaps counter-intuitively, emphasize the superiority of the monks over rival ascetics who might have superhuman powers as a result of possessing some magical object. The failure of the Buddhist monks’ superhuman powers serves to establish the fact that their powers are truly the result of meditative accomplishment.

<sup>43</sup> Vsm: 316; Nāṇamoli 1975: 372.

<sup>44</sup> The influential scholar Étienne Lamotte once noted that the term *abhijñā/abhijñā* had sometimes been translated as “supernatural power.” In stating his preference for “super-knowledge,” Lamotte noted that “the most ancient [Buddhist] sources insist on the fact that *abhijñā* is the fruit of meditation (*samādhi*).” *Traité*, vol 4: 1814. Citing the *Sāmaññaphala-sutta* (D i.77ff), Lamotte quotes from the passage cited earlier in reference to the simile of the skilled potter, well prepared clay, and so forth. He pointed out that the superpowers arise only through a state of meditative concentration that is entirely pure, clear, without fault, and so forth. While Lamotte did not state precisely what is wrong with translating *abhijñā* as supernatural power, the fact the superpowers fall within the realm of what is explainable by means of “natural” processes like meditation is perhaps one reason.

<sup>45</sup> Swinburne 1970: 20. Nowell-Smith in Flew and MacIntyre 1955: 253.

<sup>46</sup> In arguing against this point by Nowell-Smith, Richard Swinburne makes a distinction between two different types of explanation: scientific explanation and personal explanation. While the former involves citing a law or hypothesis capable of predictive expansion, the latter, which Swinburne claims to be an entirely different kind of explanation, explains events in terms of the intention or purpose of an agent (human or otherwise). Since personal explanation, according to Swinburne, does not necessarily have to be subsumed under natural laws, a miracle could for him be explainable and still be considered a violation of natural law. Swinburne 1970: 53-55.

<sup>47</sup> Psm ii.207.

<sup>48</sup> Vsm: 314ff. Nāṇamoli 1999: 369-371. In A v.46-60, the list of ten *kaṣiṇa* includes consciousness (*viññāṇa*) instead of light (*āloka*). Psm i.49 lists eight *kaṣiṇa*, omitting the final two.

<sup>49</sup> Psm ii.208.

<sup>50</sup> AKBh: 870; Kośa, vol. 5, p. 114ff.

<sup>51</sup> More examples are given by John Strong. See note 42 above.

<sup>52</sup> Lamotte mentions that another scholastic text preserved in Chinese translation, T 1553, which he calls the *Abhidharmāmṛtarasa*, makes reference to superhuman powers of the noble ones and generally categorizes superhuman powers in a way that is similar to the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-śāstra*. *Traité*, vol 4: 1819.

<sup>53</sup> M iii.112.

<sup>54</sup> Psm ii.211. *Traité*, vol. 4:1819, 1821-1822. According to Lamotte, the *Abhidharmāmṛtarasa* (T. 1553, k. 2, p. 975 c 24-25) also contains a similar three-fold classification of superhuman power.

<sup>55</sup> Vsm: 321; Nāṇamoli 1999: 377.

<sup>56</sup> “Superhuman power by means of the pervasive influence of knowledge” and “superhuman power in the sense of flourishing by means of correct practice in various instances” also refer to the achievement of *nirvāṇa*. In the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*, the former refers to several narratives, elaborated in the *Visuddhimagga*, which describe how certain individuals avoid calamity due to the influence of the knowledge to be gained by them later in life by following the path to sainthood. The *Paṭisambhidāmagga* describes superhuman power in the sense of flourishing by means of correct practice in various instances in this way: “The goal of destroying all the defilements succeeds (*ijjhati*) by means of the path to becoming a

saint (*arahant*). This is superhuman power in the sense of flourishing by means of correct practice in various instances.” (Psm ii.214.) Interestingly, the *Visuddhimagga* also cites this statement in its description of the superhuman power by means of the pervasive influence of knowledge. However, the *Visuddhimagga* cites another interpretation that says distinction achieved from doing any type of work can be classified in this way. Vsm: 323; Ñāṇamoli 1999: 379.

<sup>57</sup> M i.160ff.

<sup>58</sup> Deleanu 2006: 317.

<sup>59</sup> It is less common, but both Pāli and Sanskrit texts sometimes call to the first five as “the five superpowers” (*pañca-abhijñā*), leaving out the sixth one altogether. S ii.216 *Mahāvastu*, i.284, ii.33, ii.96. *Divyāvadāna*, p. 321. The *Visuddhimagga* also discusses only the first five and refers to them as the mundane superpowers. Vsm: 314; Ñāṇamoli 1999: 369.

<sup>60</sup> Traité, vol 3: 1281-1290. Roughly speaking, the liberations are seen as preliminary to the masteries, and the masteries are seen as preliminary to the objects of meditation. These aids to concentration generally help to imbue the meditator with a certain amount of power and freedom over the world of objects of desire and subtle form.

<sup>61</sup> Deleanu 2006: 24.

<sup>62</sup> M iii.72ff.

<sup>63</sup> However, this becomes more problematic as Buddhism develops a doctrine of faith and saving grace. When a Bodhisattva or Buddha becomes able to save living beings in hell, or causes them to be reborn in their Buddha-fields after death, in spite of their karma, then it is difficult to say that the powers have not gone beyond natural law. Even in those cases, however, one can perhaps argue that a parallel type of cause and effect is at work.

<sup>64</sup> Florin Deleanu, who has edited and translated this portion of the *Śrāvakaḥmūmi*, has surmised that the passage may have been added at some stage to a relatively established text. It does seem out of place for the *Śrāvakaḥmūmi* to invoke the distinction between noble and ordinary types of superhuman power in the context of a discussion of the mundane path. However, it is not entirely unexpected, given that the discussion is about superhuman powers.

<sup>65</sup> This style of classification is one reason to suspect a later date of composition for the passage.

<sup>66</sup> And thus, they are associated with the attainment of correct knowledge of reality, which conveys the ability to teach the Dharma.

<sup>67</sup> Subcommentary on chapter seven, verse 35. AKBh: 858; Kośa, vol. 5, p. 85ff.

<sup>68</sup> DhA iii.210.

<sup>69</sup> Brown 1928: 13-22.

<sup>70</sup> Div: 28. See Strong 2008.

<sup>71</sup> This is one of Luis Gómez’s formulations.

<sup>72</sup> Div: 161.

<sup>73</sup> AKBh: 856-857; Kośa, vol. 5, p. 83ff.

<sup>74</sup> “In short, for one who has obtained mastery of meditation and whose mind is skilled and well-developed, the accomplishment of all aims from mere desire with the support of meditative mastery is called ‘noble power’ (*āryaprabhāva*).” Bbh 40.

<sup>75</sup> La Vallée Poussin discusses this issue in his articles, “Le Bouddha et Les Abhijñās” (1931) and “Musīla et Nārada” (1937). It is also discussed, although somewhat more generally, in Eliade 1969: 191ff.

<sup>76</sup> Bbh 49-50.

<sup>77</sup> This is another way of characterizing the opposition between “calming” (*samatha*, *śamatha*) and “insight” (*vipassanā*, *vipaśyanā*) types of meditation.

<sup>78</sup> D iii.241; A iii.21; S iii.13. AKBh: 878. Cited and discussed in La Vallée Poussin 1937: 198.

## Chapter V

### Miracles and Magic in Mahāyāna Buddhist Literature

Non-Mahāyāna and Mahāyāna Buddhist scholastic literature contain similar characterizations of superhuman powers.<sup>1</sup> For instance, the *Abhidharmakośa* divides superhuman powers into powers of motion and powers of creation, while the *Bodhisattvabhūmi* categorizes them into powers of transformation and creation. In its characterization of the various types of superhuman power, the *Bodhisattvabhūmi* also draws connections between miracles such as one finds in Mahāyāna literature and miracles like those at Śrāvastī and Sāṅkāśya, when the Buddha multiplies himself and displays the heavens and other world-systems. This chapter will take its cue from the fact that Buddhist scholastic literature acknowledges such connections, and explore some of miracles in Mahāyāna literature.

It will not be possible to give a comprehensive view of miracles in Mahāyāna literature, but only to suggest some of the main themes and rhetorical strategies that appear in some of the miracles described in a few Mahāyāna *sūtras*, paying close attention to how these miracles compare with those we have already discussed, like the “great miracle” at Śrāvastī and the descent from the heavens at Sāṅkāśya. The themes selected for analysis will be primarily those that connect the narrative form and doctrinal

content of miracles in Mahāyāna literature to the wider Buddhist discourse on miracles and superhuman powers.

Miracles in Mahāyāna literature share many similarities of narrative form with miracles in non-Mahāyāna literature. Mahāyāna literature generally seems to presuppose a corpus of non-Mahāyāna narrative and doctrine, but one ought not to say that miracles in Mahāyāna *sūtras* necessarily postdate or depend upon non-Mahāyāna miracle stories. It may be more appropriate to say that Mahāyāna and non-Mahāyāna miracle stories grew alongside one another and influenced each other for several centuries.<sup>2</sup> Since the versions that we possess of non-Mahāyāna narratives probably date from a period of time several centuries after Mahāyāna *sūtras* began to be composed, it may be that Mahāyāna *sūtras* influenced the development of miracle tales in non-Mahāyāna literature to some extent. The question of influence is thus a difficult one to answer.

While miracles in Mahāyāna literature share some elements of narrative form and content with non-Mahāyāna miracles, they are nevertheless characteristically Mahāyāna in that they also illustrate important doctrines of Mahāyāna Buddhism. They build upon basic Buddhist premises like the connection between meditation and superhuman powers, or that between miraculous displays of superhuman power and teaching the Dharma, but also illustrate well-known doctrines of Mahāyāna Buddhism, like the two truths, dependent origination and emptiness, the non-arising of conditioned phenomena, the doctrine of illusion (*māyā*), the three bodies of the Buddha, pure and impure “Buddha-fields” (*buddha-kṣetra*), and so forth. Miracles in Mahāyāna literature are extremely rich in imagery and symbolism, and they weave these many doctrinal elements into their narrative form. Thus, they seem to go further than non-Mahāyāna miracles do in

describing ways in which Buddhas and Bodhisattvas liberate with their superhuman powers both themselves and others.

We saw in the last chapter that Buddhist literature distinguishes between “noble” and “common” types of superhuman powers. The distinction seems to point to something unique about the Buddha and his disciples, one of the reasons why they are superior to other ascetics, who may or may not possess superhuman powers through magic, meditation or some other means. However, we also saw that Buddhists debated the actual concomitants of awakening and the relative value of those concomitants. The so-called transcendent superpower, the third type of knowledge and sixth superpower, placed emphasize on correct understanding of the nature of reality as the basis for teaching the Dharma.

In contrast, the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-sāstra* stresses that the Bodhisattva may acquire and use the so-called mundane superhuman powers in order to convert more people over countless rebirths, while at the same time maintaining that the Bodhisattva can achieve correct understanding of the nature of reality without resulting in cessation of rebirth. The tension between superhuman powers and knowledge of the nature of reality that we have found in different narrative and scholastic contexts is resolvable in other ways, as well. As we will see in this chapter, the resolution of this tension is one of the characteristics of miracles in Mahāyāna literature. In resolving this tension, however, Mahāyāna also begins to collapse the distinction that we have tried to establish between miracles and magic.

One Buddha, Many Buddhas (also, Buddhas and their Bodies)

One of the questions raised by the Buddhist discourse on miracles and superhuman powers is what makes the Buddha unique. The Buddha must be distinguished in various ways from his eminent disciples, even though they have also achieved awakening and possess superhuman powers. It also means distinguishing the Noble Ones, i.e. the Buddha and his disciples (who may or may not possess superhuman powers) from other rival ascetics (who also may or may not possess superhuman powers), as well as from divine and semi-divine beings, from animals and ghosts who can fly, and so forth.

Despite the interest in depicting the Buddha as unique, Buddhist texts pursue different lines of reasoning about what constitutes the uniqueness of the Buddha. One of the strongest statements on the uniqueness of the Buddha is found in the well-known scholastic treatise, *Milindapañha*, a text of uncertain origin that purports to describe a conversation between a Buddhist monk, Nāgasena, and the Greek King Milinda (Menander), who reigned in Northwest India in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, B.C.E. Whether there really was a historical meeting that formed the paradigm for the text is not known, but the fact that King Milinda features so prominently in the text may suggest a date of composition or compilation sometime after his reign in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C.E. In any case, the passage concerning the Buddha's uniqueness begins with Milinda asking why there shouldn't be two Buddhas at the same time.<sup>3</sup> His thinking seems to be that two Buddhas would be twice the good.

Nāgasena argues in response, however, that two Buddhas cannot arise at the same place, that is, in the same universe, at the same time. Several reasons are given, including the strife that would potentially ensue between followers of the two different Buddhas, but two reasons stand out for our purposes. For one, the "ten-thousand world" universe



would be unable to support two Buddhas at the same time. The universe could not sustain it, and it would be destroyed if two Buddhas were to exist in it at the same time. The other reason is based on the common canonical description of the Buddha as “foremost, supreme, etc.”<sup>4</sup> If the Buddha is uniquely foremost, as Buddhist scriptures state, and since scripture must be correct, then there cannot be two uniquely foremost beings. It would be like having two kings. This drives to the heart of what it means to say that someone or something is unique, a point that is understandable by those who stress correct English usage of the term.

Strictly speaking, this doctrine of a single Buddha at a time does not seem to contradict either the existence of past and future Buddhas or the existence of other Buddhas in other cosmoses or Buddha-fields at the same time. Moreover, it does not seem to contradict, but rather seems to highlight, miracles in which the Buddha uses his superhuman powers to multiply himself or create mind-made bodies that travel to distant realms. These miracles are made even more miraculous when seen before the backdrop of Nāgasena’s pronouncement that the universe could not sustain more than one Buddha (in the universe) at one time.

In non-Mahāyāna texts, perhaps the paradigmatic example of the multiplication miracle is the “Great Miracle” at Śrāvastī, found in the *Divyāvadāna* and elsewhere. Though creating a double also plays a role in the Pāli version of events found in the *Dhammapada* commentary, the *Divyāvadāna* describes Buddhas filling the sky like a “garland of Buddhas” (*buddhāvataṃsaka*). Many other non-Mahāyāna texts also feature multiplication miracles of one sort or another, as do many Mahāyāna texts. Multiplication miracles occur in the miracles in the introduction (*nidāna*) to the longer 25,000 verse *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra*. They occur during the appearance of the jeweled *stūpa* in the

Lotus or *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka-sūtra*, and also in Sudhana's vision of the tower at the culmination of the *Gaṇḍavyūha-sūtra*, and elsewhere in the scripture.

In the introduction to the *Prajñāpāramitā sūtra*, for instance, the Buddha enters into a meditation called the “King of Meditations” (*samādhi-rāja*), a meditation that is said to contain all other meditative states within it.<sup>5</sup> When the Buddha emerges from this meditation, light blazes forth from the Buddha's superhuman body, illuminating countless world systems in all the ten directions. Then, he covers this world system with his tongue. From his tongue blazes forth light, and upon each of the countless rays of light a lotus flower arises made of precious jewels. On each of these lotuses sits a magically created Buddha. These Buddha-replicas then spread throughout countless world systems in all ten directions teaching the Dharma related to the six “perfect virtues” (*pāramitā*).

This image of Buddha-replicas seated upon jeweled lotus flowers calls to mind the Great Miracle of Śrāvastī, but another multiplication miracle in the passage evokes the idea of multiple Buddhas, and not just Buddha-replicas. After a series of other miracles that work to purify the Buddhafield of Śākyamuni Buddha, the Buddha smiles, and rays of light illuminate not only this Buddhafield, but other Buddhafields in the ten directions where other Buddhas reside. Buddhas in those realms each send a Bodhisattva to pay homage to Śākyamuni and hear him teach the Perfection of Wisdom *sūtra*. These Bodhisattvas bring lotuses, which Śākyamuni strews through countless world-systems. Upon each of these lotuses sits a Buddha replica teaching the Perfection of Wisdom *sūtra*.

Seen in the light of Nāgasena's comments, it is possibly significant that the other Buddhas do not enter Śākyamuni's universe in the *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra*. In the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka-sūtra*, however, when the jeweled *stūpa* containing the bodily

remains of a Buddha of the past named Prabhūtaratna emerges from the ground in the Sahā universe, through the power of his vow, all the Buddhas of all the ten directions gather in one world system. The Buddhas in all the ten directions are actually said to be “magical emanations” (*nirmāṇa*) of the Buddha Śākyamuni.<sup>6</sup> As all the Buddhas gather, the Sahā universe becomes purified, as it does in the *Prajñāpāramitā sūtra*. Then, Śākyamuni opens the jeweled *stūpa* and reveals the body of Prabhūtaratna, who appears as if in a state of meditation. Prabhūtaratna invites Śākyamuni to sit beside him, and the two Buddhas sit side by side in the jeweled *stūpa*, while the audience, by means of the wondrous power of the Buddhas, levitates into the air in order to get a better view of them.<sup>7</sup>

Stories of multiplication miracles are one way of thinking about the existence of many Buddhas at that same time. Another way of conceptualizing the belief is the theory of three bodies of the Buddha.<sup>8</sup> According to this theory, the body of the Buddha that appears in this impure universe is an “illusory” or “magically created body” (*nirmāṇa-kāya*). This theory assumes that there are many Buddhas, some of whom currently reside in purified “Buddhafiels” (*buddha-kṣetra*), Buddhist paradises technically outside the realm of *saṃsāra*. In these pure Buddhafiels, the Buddhas possess a magnificent, superhuman body called the *sambhoga-kāya*, the second type of body of the Buddha. The third body of the Buddha is a transcendent body called the *dharma-kāya*, a formless, unmanifested body that transcends all description and characterization. Buddhas that manifest in the world as the magical illusions or as magnificent beings in pure Buddhafiels are not different from the transcendent dharma-body of the Buddha. According to the doctrine of the three bodies of the Buddha, the Buddha appears in different forms, but there is something about the Buddha that remains transcendent.

The theory of the three bodies of the Buddha assumes the existence of magically created bodies. All of these Buddhas would ultimately possess the same nature, but they nonetheless could manifest in infinitely diverse forms. All of these Buddhas also possess the power to create their own magical emanations and send these manifestations to other universes, thus producing a powerful image of the equality of all Buddhas.

The ability to manifest many bodies also becomes one of the standard signs of advancing along the stages of the Bodhisattva. As they advance, Bodhisattvas acquire more bodies in order to convert and exhort more people. The number and quality of the magically produced bodies becomes a measure of the greatness of the Bodhisattva. As the Buddha Gandottamakūṭa says of Vimalakīrti in the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, “The greatness of that Bodhisattva is such that he sends magically created emanations to all Buddhafields, and his magically created emanations attend the beings [in those Buddhafields] by serving the Buddha.”<sup>9</sup>

### Miraculous Visions of Many Worlds

“Magical creation” (*nirmāṇa*), which includes the power to create mind-made bodies and magical doubles, multiply oneself, and conjure things out of thin air, is one of main types of superhuman power listed in scholastic treatises. Alongside *nirmāṇa* in the *Bodhisattvabhūmi*’s classification is a motley collection of other powers called powers of “transformation” (*pariṇāma*). Among them is one called *vidarśana*, which is a type of miraculous vision caused by a Buddha or advanced Bodhisattva, in which all types of beings—humans, gods, hell-beings, celestial creatures of various sorts, disciples, Bodhisattvas and so on—become able to see each other simultaneously.

One of the most important examples of this type of miracle is contained in the story of the Buddha's descent from the heavens at Sāṅkāśya, an event depicted on Buddhist monuments as early as the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, B.C.E. In that story, the gods become able to see human beings and human beings become able to see the gods. In its definition, the *Bodhisattvabhūmi* even uses this same language to describe the superhuman power of *vidarśana*.

In the *Dhammapada* commentary version of this event, the descent from the heavens completes the narrative sequence preceded by the Twin Miracle at Śrāvastī. The Pāli tradition seems to make a point of saying that the descent from the heavens always follows the Śrāvastī miracles, but it does not seem clear why this should be the case. After the performance of the Twin Miracle, the Buddha ascends to the Heaven of the Thirty-three gods and preaches to his mother during the rainy season.<sup>10</sup> When he is prepared to return from the heavens, the Buddha appears at the summit of Mount Meru, the central and highest peak of the world. The *Dhammapada* describe the following scene:

Looking up [the Buddha] had a clear vision all the way to the Brahmā heavens. Looking down, he had a clear vision all the way down to the Avīci hell. Looking in four cardinal directions and four intermediate directions, he had a clear vision of many thousands of worlds (*cakkhavāla*). Gods looked upon humans, and humans looked upon gods. All saw each other face to face. In all the assembly, thirty-six leagues in circumference, all those that saw the glory (P: *sirī*; Skt: *śrī*) of the Buddha that day wished [to achieve] the state of a Buddha."<sup>11</sup>

Then, the Buddha descends upon a jeweled staircase flanked by the gods, Indra and Mahābrahmā. In Chapter Three, I argued that this culminating vision of the narrative sequence contributes to the apotheosis of the Buddha, but it also, as John Strong points out, opens a heightened or cleared space whereby gods and human beings appear before

each other and before the Buddha on more or less equal footing.<sup>12</sup> This leveling effect brings the Buddha down to the level of gods and men, but this leveling has a hortatory effect, inducing all those present to aspire to become Buddhas in the future. The end of the passage comes close to expressing the universal Bodhisattva ethos of a Mahāyāna *sūtra*.<sup>13</sup> Yet, this miracle remains mainly about the superiority of the Buddha to the gods who act as his servants and to the humans who witness the event.

Humans and gods seeing each other is one type of miraculous vision (*vidarśana*) created through the superhuman power of a Buddha or Bodhisattva. The doctrine of many Buddhas requires that there also be many Buddhafields for these Buddhas to reside in. The *Bodhisattvabhūmi* also classifies miracles as *vidarśana* in which a Buddha or Bodhisattva gives all beings in a particular Buddhafield a vision of the vast arrays of other Buddhafields where other Buddhas and Bodhisattvas reside.<sup>14</sup> This is another type of miraculous vision that one frequently finds in Mahāyāna literature. Narratives also associate these two types of miraculous vision.

For instance, it is particularly striking that the *Akṣobhyavyūha*, which tells of Abhirati, the Buddhafield of Buddha Akṣobhya, refers to a staircase in that universe similar to the one described in the *Dhammapada* commentary version of the descent from the heavens.<sup>15</sup> According to the *Dhammapada* commentary, the jeweled staircase persisted for seven days. In Abhirati, however, the staircase of precious jewels is permanent. Gods use the staircase to descend to the human realm to hear Akṣobhya teach the Dharma. While the staircase also allows humans to ascend to the realm of the gods, in Abhirati, human beings do not desire to be reborn as gods. The gods also prefer the human world, because the gods in Abhirati are focused primarily on following the teachings of the Buddha.<sup>16</sup>

The *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* also refers to a jeweled staircase in its description of the Abhirati universe. In the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, Vimalakīrti uses his superhuman powers to shrink Abhirati and miraculously display it in the presence of the Buddha Śākyamuni and an audience including many disciples and Bodhisattvas in our universe. The reference to the jeweled staircase seems to establish more clearly the narrative connection between the descent from the heavens at Sāṅkāśya, one type of miraculous vision, and the miraculous display of the Abhirati universe itself. According to the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, however, both gods and human beings use the staircase, the former to descend to hear Akṣobhya teach the Dharma and the latter to visit the gods in the Heaven of the Thirty-three.

Sometimes, a multiplication miracle occurs when a Buddha or Bodhisattva produces a mind-made body and sends it somewhere on a mission for one reason or another. For instance, in the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, after producing a vision of a Buddhafield named Sarvagandhasugandha (“All Smells Smell Good”), Vimalakīrti creates a mind-made body and sends it to that Buddhafield. He orders it to request the remains from the meal of the Buddha Gandhottamakūṭa. When the emanated being returns with the fragrant food, accompanied by visiting Bodhisattvas from that universe, the miracle becomes another opportunity for comparing that Buddhafield with this one, called Sahā, where the Buddha Śākyamuni and Vimalakīrti reside.

Just as the many Buddhas can be compared, so also can the different Buddhafields where they reside. One can distinguish between so-called “pure” (*parisuddha*) and “impure” (*aparisuddha*) Buddhafields.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, the distinction or lack thereof between pure and impure Buddhafields is one of the repeating themes of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*. Buddhafields like Sarvagandhasugandha are said to be “purified” by the power of the fulfillment of the Bodhisattva vow. These purified Buddhafields are paradises in several

senses of the term. They are sometimes described as gated gardens with the resident Buddha seated on a central pavilion. No suffering is known in them. All the beings born in them are Bodhisattvas dedicated to the Dharma.

By contrast, in the words of Śāriputra in the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, apparently “impure” Buddhafields like our own “great earth” (*mahāpṛthivī*) have highs and lows. They appear filled with thorns, mountain peaks, chasms (*śvabhra*) and cesspools (*gūthoḍi*). Given the fact that the Buddha had just established the connection between the purity of the Bodhisattva’s vow, the purity of the Bodhisattva’s state of mind and the purity of the Buddhafield, it seems natural to ask, as Śāriputra does, whether the state of affairs in our Buddhafield reflects some impurity in the vow or the state of mind of Śākyamuni Buddha. Here, Śāriputra, as he does throughout the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, reflects conventional understanding and acts as a foil for the ultimate truth.

According to the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, if there appear to be highs and lows in our universe, then this does not reflect any impurity on the part of Śākyamuni Buddha, but rather the fact that there are highs and lows in Śāriputra’s own mind. The Buddha illustrates the true purity of this universe by granting Śāriputra and the audience a vision of the universe entirely transformed into precious jewels. The jewels represent the purity of the universe, but they also indicate the ultimate sameness of all things and perhaps even suggest the theme of detachment. For when there is nothing but precious jewels, there is no basis for distinguishing between the duality of what is precious and what is not.

The miracle of purifying a Buddhafield is also found in other Mahāyāna *sūtras*. After the multiplication miracle in the 25,000 verse *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra*, there is another sequence of other miracles, including an earthquake and several other miracles that also seem to purify the Buddhafield of Śākyamuni Buddha. For instance, the hells



and other “untoward” places of rebirth are abolished, and the hell-beings, animals and ghosts are all reborn as humans or gods. The sick are cured, and the crippled and congenitally disabled become whole and fully functioning.

In Mahāyāna scriptures, the miraculous vision of other Buddhafiels granted to vast audiences of beings through the superhuman power of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas does more than simply emphasize the superiority of the Buddha or a particular Bodhisattva. They do more than simply bring the gods down to the level of humans and humans to the level of gods. They also illustrate a vision of reality as Buddhas see it. The teaching of the Dharma is demonstrated by the miraculous vision, or the vision becomes a basis for a teaching about the ultimate nature of reality. Despite their claim that all Buddhas and Buddhafiels ultimate pure and the same, Mahāyāna *sūtras* like the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* continually oscillate between this ultimate perspective and the conventional perspective whereby distinctions and diversities are maintained. The metaphors of magic and magical illusion are evocative of this oscillation. Conventionally, things appear substantial, but ultimately, they are illusory.

### The Buddha as Magician; Reality as a Magical Illusion

Buddhist literature draws a distinction between “magic” and “miracle” in several different ways. In some Pāli sources, the rival ascetics claim that the Buddha is a magician, and this apparently carries a pejorative connotation.<sup>18</sup> The *Paṭisambhidāmagga* and *Visuddhimagga* acknowledge superhuman power derived from magical implements (*vijjā*) as one type of superhuman power (*iddhi/ṛddhi*). And in Yaśomitra’s subcommentary (*vyākhyā*) on the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* is found the following:

“How do other rival ascetics, such as Maskari and others, criticize the Buddha? In a treatise of the Nirganthas, it is said: ‘Who displays his superhuman powers? The magician (*māyāvin*) Gotama does.’ Also, they say ‘Every hundred ages a magician of this type appears in the world and causes the people to be consumed by his magic.’”<sup>19</sup>

The rival ascetics accuse the Buddha of displaying his superhuman powers and call him a magician. In the *Kevaṭṭa-sutta*, displays of superhuman powers are criticized as ineffective means of conversion, because the skeptic can claim that the superhuman power on display is merely derived from a magical charm or spell. Teaching the Dharma is said to be the miracle (*pāṭihāriya*). Yet, in the *Abhidharmakośa*, we see the rival ascetics accusing the Buddha of being a magician, and an effective magician, at that.

The comparison between the Buddha’s powers and those of other people is expressed in terms of different types or levels of “magic” (*vijjā*, *vidyā*) in a Pāli narrative about a monk named Pilindavaccha found in the *Theragāthā* commentary.<sup>20</sup> According to this story, Pilindavaccha had grown disgusted with the realm of rebirth and became an ascetic before the awakening of the Buddha. After becoming a wandering ascetic, Pilindavaccha acquired what the text calls the Lesser Gandhāri Charm (*cūḷagandhārivijjā*). With this charm, the text says, Pilindavaccha could fly through the air and read others’ minds. After the awakening of the Buddha, however, Pilindavaccha finds that his Lesser Gandhāri Charm no longer works.

The text informs the reader that this is due to the “majestic, wondrous presence” (*anubhāva*) of the Buddha, but Pilindavaccha wonders, “Perhaps the Buddha possesses a ‘Greater Gandhāri Charm’ (*mahāgandhārivijjā*) that impedes my Lesser Gandhāri Charm.” He goes to the Buddha and asks him to teach him the “magic” (*vijjā*) that he knows. Instead, the Buddha tells Pilindavaccha to join the monastic order, and once he does, teaches him the Dharma and gives him the objects of meditation suitable for him to

practice (*caritānukūlaṃ kammaṭhānaṃ*). In little time, Pilindavaccha achieves the “foundations” (*upanissaya*) for sainthood, and then, “practicing insight” (*vipassanaṃ vadḍhetvā*), soon becomes a saint.

The story plays off the dual meaning of *vijjā*: magic and knowledge. It implies that Pilindavaccha regains his superhuman powers through meditation, but also suggests that something more is required to become a saint: insight into or knowledge of the Dharma. We can recall that different lists of *vijjā/vidyā* are found elsewhere in descriptions of the constituents of the Buddha’s awakening and the fruits of the homeless life.

We have thus far encountered two words for magician in Buddhist literature. The *vidyādhara*, one who possesses spells, describes magicians who acquire superhuman abilities by possessing certain types of charms or magic spells (*vijjā/vidyā*). *Dhāraṇī* and *mantra* are other common terms for spells, and these terms become more common in later Buddhist Tantric literature. Secondly, the *māyāvin* or *māyākāra*, one who works illusions, characterizes the magician as an illusionist or a creator of magical illusions (*māyā*).

The term *māyā* or magical illusion first appears in Buddhist literature as one of a number of stock metaphors used to describe the insubstantiality of things.<sup>21</sup> In the *Samyutta-nikāya*, for instance, each of the five aggregates making up the person is described using one of a number of metaphors that emphasize their insubstantiality. Form is compared to a ball of foam (*phenapiṇḍa*), feelings to a bubble (*budbuda*), conceptions to a mirage (*marīci*), latent tendencies to a banana tree (*kadalī*), and consciousness to a magical illusion (*māyā*).

An expanded and stereotyped list including some of these and other metaphors (*upamā/upamāna*) constitutes a standardized list of ten that is found in several Mahāyāna sources.<sup>22</sup> All phenomena (*dharmā*) are said to be like a magical illusion (*māyā*), mirage (*marīci*), moon reflected in water (*udakacandra*), space (*ākāśa*), echo (*partiśrutkā*), city of celestial beings (*gandharvanagara*), dream (*svapna*), shadow (*chāyā*), reflection in the mirror (*pratibimba*), and a magical creation (*nirmāṇa*). In many Mahāyāna *sūtras*, therefore, magical illusion and magical creation become evocative and useful metaphors for describing the nature of reality. The Buddha can also be referred to as a magician without negative connotation. The Buddha is the true or greatest magician because he understands that reality is (like) a magical illusion.

The idea that conditioned phenomena are or are like a magical illusion can be found quite frequently throughout Mahāyāna Buddhist literature. Speaking about action and its effects, for instance, Nāgārjuna uses the following simile in verses 31-33 of Chapter Seventeen of the *Mūlamadhyamaka-kārikā*:

Just as the Teacher uses his superhuman powers (*ṛddhi-sampadā*) to conjure a magically created person (*nirmita*) and this conjured person (*nirmita*) conjures another conjured thing (*nirmita*),

In the same way, the agent [of an action] is like the conjured person and his action is like the other conjured thing.

Defilements, actions, bodies, agents, and effects are all like a city of celestial beings (*gandharva-nagara*), a mirage (*marīci*) and a dream (*svapna*).<sup>23</sup>

These verses come on the heels of an argument that action, agent and result are all “empty of inherent existence” (*niḥsvabhāva*). While Nāgārjuna does not come out and say explicitly that all dependently arisen phenomena are illusory, his argument is that actions, defilements and so forth, are like the magical illusion of an illusory power, an

illusion produced by an illusion produced by the Buddha's superhuman powers. The metaphor of the magical illusion is linked to the doctrine of the non-arising of all phenomena, that is, their emptiness of intrinsic existence. This is, as it were, the ultimate truth.

The metaphor of magical illusion also intersects with stories of rivalry between the Buddha and other magicians. The *Bodhisattvabhūmi* classifies dominating the superhuman powers of others among the various types of superhuman powers that Buddhas and Bodhisattvas possess. This theme is prominent in the story of Pilindavaccha. Another example of this genre of tale is found in the *Pāṭika-sutta*, where a wandering ascetic named Pāṭikaputta challenges the Buddha to a duel of their superhuman powers and then becomes literally unable to get up off his seat to go and meet the Buddha.<sup>24</sup> A further example is the story of the conversion of Bhadra the magician, where the superhuman powers of the Buddha dominate those of the magician.<sup>25</sup> Bhadra intends to play a trick on the Buddha in order to test his powers, but it is the magician whom the Buddha's superior powers render unable to retract his illusions.

After the Buddha has converted the magician, he makes a prophecy about Bhadra's future attainment of Buddhahood. Thus, the story is entitled "The Prophecy to the Magician Bhadra" (T: *sgyu-ma-mkhan bzang-po lung bstan pa*, Skt: *bhadra-māyākāra-vyākaraṇa*).<sup>26</sup> The narrative structure of the prophecy or *vyākaraṇa*, including the description of the smile of the Buddha, is roughly similar to that of the story of Pūrṇa and the other nine stories in the first group of ten in the *Avadāna-śataka*. However, the *Bhadramāyākāra-vyākaraṇa* is a Mahāyāna scripture, and contains doctrinal elements characteristic of other Mahāyāna *sūtras*.<sup>27</sup>

The basic storyline of the *Bhadramāyākāra-vyākaraṇa* is similar to the Pāli legend of Sirigutta and Garahadinna found in the *Dhammapada* commentary.<sup>28</sup> The plot of both stories centers on a meal offered to the Buddha, but the meal is really a hoax. The invitation is only meant as a test of the Buddha's powers of omniscience. The antagonists want to see if the Buddha can read their minds and foretell that the invitation is really a ploy. If the Buddha accepts the invitation, the antagonist thinks it will then prove that the Buddha does not really possess superhuman knowledge and power.

The Pāli tale of Sirigutta and Garahadinna is a story of two friends, the former of whom is a lay disciple of the Buddha and the latter a disciple of the Jains. Sirigutta becomes annoyed with his friend's constant urging that he support the Jains, and decides to test Garahadinna's claim that his Jain teachers are omniscient.<sup>29</sup> He invites five hundred Jains to his house for a meal. Sirigutta sets up an elaborate ruse instead of a real feast. First, he digs out a pit and fills it with refuse and feces, then strings rope across it, covering it with cloth. He positions chairs around the pit with the front legs resting on the rope, so that when the Jains go to sit down, they will be flung into the dung pit. If the Jains are really omniscient, Sirigutta thinks, they will know that it is a ruse and refuse to sit down. However, the Jains fall headlong into the dung pit, thus showing that they do not possess omniscience.

Garahadinna is so angry with his friend that he refuses to speak to him for weeks. Finally, he patches things up with the intention of pulling the same trick on the Buddha and five hundred of his monks. He sets up a similar ruse, but instead of feces, he fills a pit with blazing hot coals. Of course, the Buddha, who truly is omniscient, knows Garahadinna's intention, but foresees an opportunity to perform a miracle before a great multitude. Therefore, he accepts the invitation. When the Buddha comes before the

concealed fire pit, he steps out and immediately huge lotus flowers emerge from the coals and form a seat for the Buddha and his monks to sit on.<sup>30</sup> Then, the bowls that had been prepared to look only as if they were filled with food are miraculously filled with steaming rice for the meal. After the meal, the Buddha teaches the Dharma to a large multitude of beings, who then become followers of the Buddha.

We have seen other narratives in which skepticism is expressed about the purported superhuman knowledge and power of the Buddha's rivals. Recall the clever ploy of the Jain leader, Mahāvīra in the story of Piṇḍola-bhāradvaja and the sandalwood bowl, who instructed his followers to make it seem as though he did possess the power to fly up and retrieve the bowl. In the story of Sirigutta and Garahadina, we are dealing with a similar theme in that Sirigutta and Garahadina attempt to trick each other's teachers using a relatively simple form of deception. There is nothing particularly superhuman about their attempt, and neither Sirigutta nor Garahadina appear to possess any superhuman powers.

Despite the shared plotline of a fake meal intended as a ruse to test the omniscience of the Buddha and other similarities, the *Bhadramāyākāra-vyākaraṇa* differs markedly from the story of Sirigutta and Garahadina in that it depicts Bhadra, the antagonist, as possessing magical powers. Bhadra is described as a “magician” (T: *sgyu-ma-mkhan*, Skt: *māyākāra*) of great power and renown. He has completely mastered various “scholarly treatises” (T: *bstan-bcos*, Skt: *śāstra*) and “secret spells” (T: *gsang sngags*, Skt: *guhya-mantra*).<sup>31</sup> He is a renowned performer, and everyone in the land is convinced by his illusions, except, of course, for the Buddha and his followers.<sup>32</sup>

Bhadra is also a magician in the sense described by the *Śrāvakabhūmi*. The *Śrāvakabhūmi* distinguishes the noble superhuman powers of the Noble Ones from the

mere “magician’s show” (*māyākāra-vidarśana*) of the illusionist. While magicians can produce illusions, these illusions remain insubstantial and unreal. The *Śrāvakabhūmi* claims that the Buddha and the Noble Ones can produce illusions that are real and complete in all their faculties. Other stories suggest such hierarchies among the Noble Ones themselves. Bhadra is like a common magician in that his illusions remain insubstantial, a point that becomes relevant when the question arises whether Bhadra has truly made an offering.

Hoping to win greater support and fame, Bhadra decides to challenge the Buddha by inviting him to meal. As in the Pāli legend, Bhadra means to test the Buddha’s powers of omniscience. If he accepts the invitation, Bhadra thinks, it will prove that he does not possess the power to read Bhadra’s real intention to deceive him with an illusion. As in the Pāli legend, the Buddha knows Bhadra’s real intention. He also perceives an opportunity to convert the magician.<sup>33</sup> Bhadra doesn’t correctly perceive his own intentions, but the Buddha correctly perceives that the force of Bhadra’s previous merit has brought about the decision in his mind to challenge the Buddha. In this way, Bhadra opens himself up to being converted.

There is a basic difference between the Chinese and Tibetan translations and the Khotanese version of the story in the description of the Buddha’s reasoning after the Buddha responds that he has perceived the moment is ripe to convert Bhadra. In the Khotanese version, Aniruddha encourages the Buddha to convert Bhadra “by means of his superhuman powers” (K: *irdyō*, Skt: *ṛddhyā*), much as Kevaṭṭa had proposed in the *Kevaṭṭa-sutta*. In similar fashion to his response in the *Kevaṭṭa-sutta*, the Buddha here refers to the three types of miracle (K: *pārhāliya*, Skt: *prātihārya*). The Buddha then explains that miraculous displays of superhuman powers are useful for converting those



who are “stupid” (*murkha*). Bhadra, however, is too clever, and must be converted by a miracle of instruction (K: *śśāśana*, Skt: *śāsana*).<sup>34</sup>

The parallel conversation between the Buddha and Maudgalyāyana in the Chinese and Tibetan versions makes no reference to the three types of miracle. Instead, the Buddha explains to Maudgalyāyana that the “magic” (T: *sgyu-ma*, Skt: *māyā*) that Bhadra possesses is incomplete or “one-sided” (*phyogs-gcig-pa*, *eka-deśa*). The Buddha claims to possess magic that is “pure” (*yang-dag-pa*, *samyak?*), and goes on to explain how the nature of his magic is unsurpassable. The Buddha explains that he possesses true magic because he understands that all phenomena appear like a magical illusion.

The miraculous events unfold in the Khotanese, Chinese and Tibetan versions in much the same way. Instead of the elaborate ruses constructed with ordinary technical means by Sirigutta and Garahadinna in the Pāli legend, the magician Bhadra employs his own magical powers to construct a great pavilion with lion-thrones beneath gem and fruit laden trees. He creates many and various dishes and white clothed servants to serve them. In a way that is reminiscent of the Pāli legend, however, Bhadra constructs all of this at the town’s charnel ground and dump.

In the more elaborate Chinese and Tibetan versions, the Four Great Kings appear after Bhadra has created his magical illusion, laud Bhadra’s act of giving and ask to construct a pavilion of their own. The astonished Bhadra gives his consent. Once they have completed their arrangement, Śakra, i.e., Indra, and 30,000 gods appear asking for the same thing. They create their own pavilion, eclipsing the magnificence of those created by Bhadra and the Four Great Kings. Śakra constructs a throne for the Buddha in the Khotanese version, as well. This crescendo has its effect, and Bhadra comes to realize

that the Buddha must truly be an extraordinary being for these divine beings to have contributed to the arrangements.

Bhadra then tries to withdraw his magical illusion, but finds that he cannot do so. Bhadra realizes that the power of the Buddha is acting upon his ability to retract his magical illusion. However, Śakra consoles him by explaining that an intention directed towards the Buddha cannot be withdrawn and that his bad intentions will actually be the cause of his own future awakening. When he hears Śakra's words, Bhadra is relieved and even goes to remind the Buddha to come to his meal on the morrow.

A great multitude gathers the next day to witness the event. When the Buddha arrives, he performs a miracle so that he appears to Bhadra, the Four Great Kings, and Indra to be sitting on the lion-throne in each of their pavilions at the same time. This begins a multiplication miracle that ultimately results in Bhadra's conversion. This multiplication miracle features in the Chinese and Tibetan versions of the story, but apparently not in the Khotanese version.

Overcoming his “pride” (*nga rgyal*) and “self-absorption” (*rgyags pa*), Bhadra confesses to the Buddha all that he has done to try to deceive him. He also explains that he wished to withdraw his illusion, but was unable to do so. The illusion remained behind as if it were real. Bhadra's apology is comparable to Garahadinna's in that both try to explain why the meal cannot be served. The Buddha's response to Bhadra builds upon his prior explanation to Maugalyāyana:

The “profits” (T: *nye bar spyad pa*; P, Skt: *upabhoga*) and “material gains” (T: *yong su spyad pa*; P, Skt: *paribhoga*) of all sentient beings, Bhadra, are created by “the magic of karma” (T: *las kyi sgyu ma*; Skt: *karmamāyā*?). This community of monks is created by the magic of Dharma (T: *chos kyi sgyu ma*; Skt: *dharmamāyā*). I am created by “the magic of knowledge” (T: *ye shes kyi sgyu ma*; Skt: *jñānamāyā*). This Three-Thousand, Great-Thousand Universe is created by the magic of

“existence” (T: *mngon par 'grub pa byed pa*; Skt: *abhiniṣpatti, abhinirvṛtti?*). All “phenomena” (*chos, dharma*) are created by the magic of “the mass of [causes and] conditions” (*rkyen tshogs pa*).

The Buddha and his monks then go ahead and begin to feast on the food magically created by Bhadra, the Four Great Kings and Śakra.

The significance of the fact that the Buddha and his monks go ahead and eat the magically created food can be seen both from the perspective of the convention level of truth and from the ultimate level of truth. On the conventional level, the act illustrates the point made by the *Śrāvakabhūmi* that “mundane” superhuman powers like Bhadra’s can create illusions, but only the noble miraculous powers of the Buddha can conjure real things. In the same vein, the story also makes it clear that Bhadra, with his limited perspective, doesn’t even understand his own “real” intentions. He is really drawn to challenge the Buddha, the story tells us, by the force of his virtuous deeds in the past and owing to the “power” (T: *mthus*; P, Skt: *anubhāvena*) of the Buddha.

From the perspective of the ultimate level of truth, however, everything is equally like a magical illusion. No distinction can be made between what is real and what is illusory. They share the same nature, and because the Buddha understands this, he can accept Bhadra’s gift as pure and true in spite of the fact that Bhadra believes himself to be trying to deceive the Buddha. This raises an important point about the nature of giving from a standard Mahāyāna perspective: giver, receiver and gift are all equally illusory, and only one who understands this sameness may truly give or receive a gift.

Displays of superhuman powers and instruction in the Dharma each play an important role in the story. The miraculous display of superhuman power illustrates the basic teaching that reality is an illusion. The Buddha, because he understands this truth, possesses superior superhuman power, as his miraculous displays demonstrate. Thus,

there is a harmonious relationship established throughout the story between the display of superhuman power and the specific doctrines that are emphasized in the scripture: reality is like a magical illusion, conditioned phenomena do not arise, and so forth.

In the Pāli legend of Sirigutta and Garahadinna, the Buddha displays his superhuman powers and teaches the Dharma, but there is no explicit statement on the relationship between these acts. The Khotanese version of the conversion of Bhadra does make an explicit statement on the three types of miracle, but it remains unclear how this statement relates to the action of the story. The Khotanese version appears to be moving in the direction of unifying narrative and doctrinal components, components that are synthesized in a more complete fashion in the Chinese and Tibetan versions.

All the versions of the story of Bhadra's conversion emphasize the superiority of the Buddha, but the Chinese and Tibetan versions do so by embellishing upon the basic storyline and focusing not only on the Buddha's superhuman power, but on central Mahāyāna doctrines like emptiness, the non-arising of phenomena, the illusory nature of apparent reality and so forth. In the process, the cause of Bhadra's conversion seems to shift towards a multiplication miracle not unlike the "Great Miracle" at Śrāvastī in the *Prātihārya-sūtra*. The Buddha displays his supreme magical power not only by blocking Bhadra's attempt to withdraw his illusion, but also by multiplying himself.

This multiplication miracle then forms the basis for a reflection on the doctrine of many Buddhas. While Nāgasena attempts to avoid the whole question by upholding a doctrine of one Buddha per universe, the fact that he cites it as problem seems to indicate that the issue was thought to be significant. Once one accepts the existence of many Buddhas at the same time, the question arises whether all these Buddhas are equivalent.

Magical illusion (*māyā*) is another way of suggesting the equivalence of Buddhas. In the culminating miracle of the *Bhadramāyākāra-vyākaraṇa*, this issue arises when the magician Bhadra is converted as Buddha replicas appear reflected everywhere and in everything. Bhadra sees nothing but Buddhas and himself, bowing to each of the Buddhas. He then enters into a meditative trance called “The Meditation of ‘Bringing the Buddha to Mind’ (*buddha-anusmṛti-samādhi*).<sup>35</sup> After emerging from the trance, Bhadra asks, “Which is the real Buddha to whom I should make gifts?” The Buddha responds by saying that all the Buddhas and their magically created bodies have the same illusory nature. In fact, so does everything else. Everything is part of the magical illusion (*māyā*).

Like the *Bhadramāyākāra-vyākaraṇa*, but perhaps to an even greater extent, the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* oscillates continually between the conventional and ultimate levels of truth. On the one hand, the *sūtra*’s miraculous visions seem to demonstrate the distinction between different kinds of Buddhafields. The distinction between pure and impure Buddhafields is also connected with the nature of the mind. Yet, at the same time, one finds the theme of purification of a Buddhafield reflected in the doctrine of the emptiness, which points beyond the distinction between pure and impure to the inconceivable nature of the liberation of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. The inconceivable nature of Vimalakīrti’s liberation is reflected in the inconceivable nature of reality, both of which are illustrated by his miracles. The richness of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* is such that one finds many themes woven together into the text. The next section will explore some of the miracles of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* with an eye to how some of these themes are illustrated.

The *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* has been called the jewel of Mahāyāna Buddhist literature.<sup>36</sup> It has also been called a “masterfully faceted diamond” refracting the precious metals and other precious gems that are the *Prajñāpāramitā* scriptures and the *Avataṃsaka* or *Acintyavimokṣa* scriptures.<sup>37</sup> If indeed one may contrast the negative dialectics characteristic of texts like the *Vajracchedika prajñāpāramitā sūtra* with the grand, affirming vision of the *Gaṇḍavyūha*, then perhaps the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* cuts a middle path between them. It weaves together negative dialectics with miraculous displays and wondrous visions. The expository chapters combine with the miracle chapters, expressing at once the grandeur of miraculous visions, comparable to Sudhana’s vision of Maitreya’s tower in the *Gaṇḍavyūha*, and the paradoxical rhetoric of emptiness and dependent arising.

The Buddha’s miracle of purifying the Buddhafield in the first chapter of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* illustrates the connection between one’s state of mind and one’s conception of reality. The difference between seeing a pure Buddhafield and an impure Buddhafield is similar to the difference between understanding a magic trick and being fooled by one. This similarity is not stated outright, but seems implied by the way the chapter concludes. After several different groups of beings achieve this or that higher level of attainment along the path, the chapter ends with the following statement:

And, eighty-four thousand living beings, “who aspired to the excellent qualities of the Buddha” (*udārabuddhadharmādhimukta*), understood that all phenomena have the characteristic of being involved in “illusion” (*viñhavana*) and gave rise to the thought for unexcelled, perfect and complete awakening.<sup>38</sup>

In that way, the text draws connections between aspiring to become a Buddha, acquiring the wondrous qualities of the Buddha, and understanding the illusive nature of all phenomena.

Similar connections are drawn, relying on the metaphor of empty space, regarding the “purification” of the Buddhafield. The Buddha first states that a Buddhafield is a field of living beings. A Buddha embraces a Buddhafield to the same extent that living beings in that Buddhafield aspire to higher levels of spiritual attainment. For this reason, a Buddhafield is produced for the sake of living beings. Then, the metaphor:

If a Bodhisattva wished to construct space, he might go ahead, despite the fact that it is not possible to construct or adorn space. In the same way, if the Bodhisattva wishes to construct a Buddhafield in order to bring living beings to fruition, understanding that all phenomena are like space, he might construct a Buddhafield, despite the fact that it is not possible to construct or adorn a Buddhafield that has the nature of space.<sup>39</sup>

The Buddhafield is here compared to empty space. While it also draws distinctions and makes comparisons between different types of Buddhafields, the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* emphasizes their sameness by relying on the metaphor of empty space. In this way, the text seems uphold the simultaneous truth of the conventional and the ultimate perspectives.

The line between metaphor and reality straddled by the concept of magical illusion often becomes blurred in the case of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*. Take, for instance, the case of Vimalakīrti’s illness. Is it real or is it just an illusion? “With his skill in means” (*upāyakaūśalyena*), the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* explains, Vimalakīrti “causes himself to appear sick” (*glānam ātmānam upadarśayati*).<sup>40</sup> One subtext of the notion of appearance here is the fact that Vimalakīrti produces a magical body so that he can appear in “impure” Buddhafields like ours. Another is the skill in means with which

Bodhisattvas practice the path without falling into *nirvāṇa*. Magical illusion and magical creation become metaphors for the Bodhisattva, who does not abide (*apraṭiṣṭhita*) in *nirvāṇa* or *samsāra*. Vimalakīrti has attained and dwells in the state of “inconceivable liberation” (*acintyavimokṣa*), which affords him superhuman power and knowledge.

Vimalakīrti manifests himself as sick in order to teach other living beings about the insubstantial and impermanent nature of their own bodies, elaborating poetically upon a list of metaphors like ones we have seen before. “Friends, the body is like a ball of foam, unable to bear any pressure,” Vimalakīrti says. “The body like a mechanical object (*yantrabhūta*), held together with bones and tendons. The body is like a magical illusion consisting of the inverted views...”<sup>41</sup> As the text continues, it taps into a rich series of metaphors for describing the impermanence and insubstantiality of conventional reality.

Vimalakīrti contrasts this insubstantial, selfless, impermanent body with the body of the Buddha, which is a body of Dharma (*dharmakāya*). This body of Dharma is produced by a long list of key elements of the Buddhist path:

This body of the Tathāgata is a body of Dharma, produced (*nirjāta*) from giving (*dāna*), morality (*śīla*), concentration (*samādhi*), wisdom (*prajñā*), liberation (*vimukti*)...it is produced by friendliness (*maitrī*), compassion (*karuṇā*), joy (*mudita*) and equanimity (*upekṣā*)...patience (*kṣānti*) and mildness (*sauratya*)... courage (*vīrya*), fortitude (*dr̥ḍha*) and the roots of goodness (*kuśalamūla*)...it is produced by the meditations (*dhyāna*), liberations (*vimokṣa*), concentrations (*samādhi*), and attainments (*samāpatti*)...it is produced from the knowledges (*vidyā*) and the superpowers (*abhijñā*)...<sup>42</sup>

The prolixity of such passages in the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* is mild in comparison to that of *sūtras* like the *Gaṇḍāvyaūha*. A clear line of development can be seen in the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*'s collocations of metaphor and doctrinal terminology in this passage. Vimalakīrti distinguishes ordinary bodies from the body of the Buddha, a body that is linked to the technical attainments and perfections of the Buddhist path.



Vimalakīrti then makes his sickness become a metaphor for his Bodhisattva vow. Mañjuśrī politely inquires about Vimalakīrti's illness: "From where has your illness arisen, Householder? How long will your illness last? When will it subside?" To this Vimalakīrti replies,

Mañjuśrī, my illness will last as long as ignorance and thirst for existence last. When all beings become free of illness, then my illness will be eased. What is the reason for this? For, Mañjuśrī, the Bodhisattva is in *samsāra* for the sake of living beings, and sickness is attached to *samsāra*....You ask me, Mañjuśrī, from where my illness has arisen. The illness of the Bodhisattvas arises from great compassion.<sup>43</sup>

In this way, Vimalakīrti turns a simple question into a teaching about the Bodhisattva path. Still, the question remains unresolved as to whether Vimalakīrti is really sick or just faking.

A similar question arises earlier in the *sūtra* in the brief story about a prior meeting between Ānanda and Vimalakīrti. The story goes that once upon a time the Buddha was experiencing some physical ailment and asked Ānanda to fetch him some milk. Ānanda went to the house of a Brahmin when Vimalakīrti appeared and asked what he was doing. Ānanda replied that he was retrieving some milk for the Buddha, because he was experiencing some physical ailment. "Don't say such a thing," responded Vimalakīrti,

The body of the Tathāgata is hard as a diamond, because he has eliminated all the bad latent tendencies and possesses all the mighty qualities of good. How could illness or discomfort affect him? Be silent and go. Do not belittle the Blessed One. Do not speak in this way to others. Do not let mighty gods and Bodhisattvas visiting from other Buddhafields hear you....Go, Reverend Ānanda, go. Do not bring shame on us. Do not let other rival teachers, ascetics, or naked renunciants hear you. Do not let them think, 'This teacher cannot even cure his own illnesses. How will he cure the illnesses of others?' Reverend Ānanda, the Tathāgatas have bodies of Dharma, not material bodies. The Tathāgatas have bodies that are transcendent (*lokottara*), because they have gone beyond all mundane qualities (*lokadharmā*). The bodies of the Tathāgatas experience no

physical ailment, because they are freed of all defilements (*sarvāsravavinivṛtaḥ*).<sup>44</sup>

Hearing this statement by Vimalakīrti, Ānanda wondered whether he misheard the Buddha, but just then he heard a voice from the sky:

Ānanda! It is as the householder says. However, the Blessed One has arisen in the time of the five corruptions (*kaṣāya*) in order to train beings by acting poor, lowly and destitute. Therefore, go and fetch the milk, Ānanda, and do not be ashamed.<sup>45</sup>

Thus, while clearly opposing the transcendent and the mundane, the passage does not clearly indicate whether the Buddha was or merely acted ill.

If Vimalakīrti and Śākyamuni possess a body of Dharma like other Buddhas and other advanced Bodhisattvas, then how is it possible for them simultaneously to manifest themselves in “impure” Buddhafields? One answer appears to be the doctrine of the three bodies, a doctrine that utilizes the metaphor of the magical creation (*nirmāṇa*). When the Bodhisattvas from the “pure” Buddhafield, Sarvagandhasugandha, hear Vimalakīrti’s description of how Śākyamuni teaches the Dharma in the “impure” Buddhafield by stressing the distinction between right view and wrong view, they exclaim, “It is amazing (*āścaryaṃ*) how the Buddha Śākyamuni holds back his ‘greatness’ (*buddhamāhātmya*) in order to discipline the poor, unrefined and unruly beings there.”<sup>46</sup> While the passage does not specifically mention the Buddha’s magical body, it seems to cast the Buddha as a magician who paradoxically conceals his superhuman powers with his superhuman powers for the sake of teaching people at the level of their understanding.

Elsewhere in the text, the goddess teaches Śāriputra the ultimate truth by relying specifically on the metaphor the magically created body. Ever expressing the conventional perspective, Śāriputra innocuously asks the goddess where she will be reborn when she dies. The goddess responds, “I will be reborn where a magical

emanation (*nirmita*) of the Tathāgatas is reborn.” Śāriputra interjects, “but the magical emanation of the Tathāgatas is not born and does not die.” “In the same way,” the goddess replies, “all phenomena are not born and do not die.”<sup>47</sup> The answer makes sense in terms of the conventional level, where it is true that magically created bodies are not subject to birth and death in the same way as ordinary bodies are. However, the idea of the magically created emanations of the Buddha is extended to all phenomena in a way that stresses their ultimate emptiness.

In a later passage that closely parallels this one, Śāriputra asks Vimalakīrti from what universe he was reborn into this one. Vimalakīrti’s response echoes that of the goddess:

“Reverend Śāriputra, were one to ask a magically created man or woman, ‘From where have died and been reborn,’ what would they answer?”

[Reverend Śāriputra] responded, “Noble sir, they would say that a magically created person does not die and is not born.”

[Vimalakīrti] said, “Reverend Śāriputra, hasn’t the Tathāgata taught that all phenomena have the essential nature of a magical creation?”

Reverend Śāriputra] replied, “Indeed he has, Noble Sir.”<sup>48</sup>

Vimalakīrti uses the metaphor of the magical illusion to establish that things ultimately do not arise and are not destroyed, but by claiming that things have the essence of a magical creation, it seems that he affirms the conventional nature of reality. Indeed, the Buddha then tells Śāriputra that Vimalakīrti left the Abhirati universe of the Tathāgata Akṣobhya. The metaphor of the magical illusion seems to bridge the divide that is set up between the mundane and the transcendent, and between the conventional and the ultimate truths.

The *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* nonetheless emphasizes that one must give up one’s conventional understanding in order to achieve the inconceivable liberation of the

Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. This is clear, for instance, from the miracles in the chapter of the Goddess.

As the chapter begins, Mañjuśrī and Vimalakīrti discuss the question of how a Bodhisattva who views all living beings as a wise man views the moon in the water, as a magician views a magical creation, and so forth, can simultaneously feel great love and great compassion for them. While Vimalakīrti's answer to this question is complex and difficult for me to understand, the miracles of the Goddess seem to illustrate the teaching. She appears in the room, and showers the Bodhisattvas and disciples with flowers. The flowers fall from the bodies of the Bodhisattvas, but stick to the bodies of the disciples. The disciples even try to use their superhuman powers (*rddhiprātihāryaiḥ*) to shake them off, but cannot do so. The Goddess asks Śāriputra, "Noble Śāriputra, why do you shake off the flowers?"

Again, Śāriputra is used as conventional foil. He exclaims, "Goddess, these flowers are not proper (*akalpika*), therefore I am trying to shake them off." The implication is that flowers are not appropriate for monks to wear. Playing on the meaning of the word improper (*akalpika*), the Goddess responds that the flowers are proper (*kalpika*), using a word that is related to *vikalpa*, which means "mentally constructed." She continues,

The Elder Śāriputra discriminates (*kalpayati*) and conceptualizes (*vikalpayati*)....Those who do not discriminate or conceptualize, they are proper (*kalpika*). Look, Śāriputra, the flowers do not stick to these great beings, because they have destroyed all discrimination and conceptualization.<sup>49</sup>

If flowers represent passion, sexual desire and love, then the Goddess seems to be pointing out that one can only generate great love and great compassion when one does not discriminate or conceptualize.

Later, the Goddess illustrates a similar point using the example of the magical illusion. Śāriputra asks why she does not change out of her female form. The goddess responds by asking him, if a magician created a woman with his magic, and you asked her why she does not change out of her female form, what would she say? Then, the goddess “uses her superhuman powers of intention” (*adhiṣṭhānam adhiṣṭhati*) to transform herself into Śāriputra and Śāriputra into her own female form. She prompts him to change himself out of his female form, and he cannot, exclaiming “I don’t know what to change!”

The Goddess concludes,

“If you, Śāriputra, could change out of your female form, then all women could change out of their female form. Just as the Elder [Śāriputra] is not a woman, but only appears as one, in the same way, all women in the form of women are not women, but appear in the form of women. With reference to this, the Blessed One said, “All phenomena are neither male nor female.”

It is unclear what views of sexuality and gender the chapter is advocating here. Śāriputra seems to make a sexist remark, and the Goddess responds by changing him into a woman, a state from which he is unable to remove himself. What does the Goddess mean by drawing the comparison between Śāriputra, magically transformed into a woman, and all women? Do all women somehow wish to become men, but cannot? It seems unlikely that the Goddess does.

The final, untraced quote from the Buddha seems to say that ultimately one should not discriminate between male and female. In any case, only when the Goddess releases her superhuman power of intention does Śāriputra return to being himself. Whatever one may say about the miracle, it seems that the Goddess uses her superhuman powers to dominate Śāriputra, emphasizing the fact that those who understand that all

things have the nature of a magical illusion and not discriminating or conceptualizing difference gives one the power to manipulate reality.

Vimalakīrti's superhuman powers are evidence of his "inconceivable liberation" (*acintya-vimokṣa*). This inconceivable liberation is described and illustrated with a miracle. As in the earlier contrast that is drawn between ordinary bodies and the body of Dharma, the chapter describing the inconceivable liberation begins with Vimalakīrti contrasting conventional reality with the nature of the Dharma. He stresses the transcendent nature of the Dharma, which is not an object (*aviśaya*), being free from all conceptualization, verbalization, defilement, and so on.

Vimalakīrti's lecture is prompted by Śāriputra, who wonders where all the gathered Bodhisattvas and disciples are going to sit. Earlier in the story, Vimalakīrti had used his powers to make his house appear empty. Now, he uses his superhuman powers to bring thirty-two thousand thrones, thousands of meters high, from a distant world-system called Merudhvajā. These thrones Vimalakīrti places in his house without shrinking them or expanding the house.

Given the sharpness with which Vimalakīrti had criticized Śāriputra for thinking about a chair, one might wonder why Vimalakīrti then brings chairs in such miraculous fashion. On one level, it seems that Vimalakīrti is merely impressing Śāriputra and the other members of the audience with a miracle. On another level, however, the miracle of the chairs becomes the first in a sequence of miracles, each of which seem intended to illustrate and describe the inconceivable liberation.

For instance, the Bodhisattva who abides in the inconceivable liberation is said to be able to take Mt. Sumeru, the highest and biggest of mountains, and put it inside a mustard seed, without the former becoming smaller or the latter becoming bigger. The

Bodhisattva who abides in the inconceivable liberation can pour all of the waters of the oceans into one pore of his own skin without the water-dwelling creatures knowing it or becoming injured in any way. The Bodhisattva who abides in the inconceivable liberation can pick up a universe of many thousands of worlds, spin it on his finger like a potter's wheel, throw it like a discus beyond countless other world-systems, catch it and put it back where it was without anyone knowing. The Bodhisattva who abides in the inconceivable liberation can make a week seem like an eon, or make an eon seem like the passing of a week.<sup>50</sup>

The sequence of miracles continues, but these examples are enough to see how they all seem to illustrate the nature of inconceivability. In each case, the miraculous display violates what one might call the basic principle of non-contradiction. The miracles seem to violate basic ideas of dimensionality, physical space and the passage of time. They appear visible to some and not to others. These miracles seem vaguely reminiscent of the Buddha's power to touch the sun and moon and the opposing manipulation of fire and water in the Twin Miracle. However, whereas those miracles seem generally to establish nothing more than the overwhelming power of the Buddha over the primordial forces of nature, these miracles not only describe the inconceivable power of those who dwell in the inconceivable liberation, but also give a glimpse of the inconceivable nature of reality.

The same paradigm or type of miracle is also apparent in the last of the miracles of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, when Vimalakīrti displays the Abhirati universe in the presence of the Buddha and a great multitude. Without getting up from his chair, Vimalakīrti picks up the Abhirati universe and all it contains, and like a potter at his

wheel, reduces it in size, carries it to the Sahā universe, and displays it before the Buddha and his audience.

The literary style of these miracles in the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* shares something in common with those of the *Avataṃsaka-sūtra*. While the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* does not necessarily stress the theme of the interpenetration of all phenomena as much as the *Avataṃsaka-sūtra* does, miracles like those described above, which stress the inconceivability of liberation, evoke some of the grandeur of the miraculous visions of the *Avataṃsaka-sūtra*, such as the climactic vision of the tower in the *Maitreya-vimokṣa* section of the *Gaṇḍavyūha-sūtra*. The next section will briefly explore the relationship between the two in terms of the style and theme, focusing on some metaphors and visual descriptions contained in the vision.<sup>51</sup>

### The Vision of Maitreya's Tower

Having just concluded the section on miracles of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* with a discussion of the miraculous vision of the Abhirati universe, it seems appropriate to conclude this chapter with a brief discussion of Sudhana's vision of Maitreya's tower. Sudhana's vision of Maitreya's tower occurs at the end of the *Gaṇḍavyūha-sūtra* and can be considered the climax of the *sūtra*.<sup>52</sup> It is probably one of the most visually impressive and thematically rich miracles in Mahāyāna literature, indeed far richer in imagery and metaphor than can be conveyed in this brief section (of the chapter). However, it also exemplifies the themes we have discussed above and emphasizes the interdependence and mutual interpenetration of all things perhaps even more than have the Mahāyāna miracles discussed so far.



The *Avataṃsaka-sūtra* or *Buddha-avataṃsaka-sūtra*, of which the *Gaṇḍavyūha-sūtra* is part, has been aptly described as a text of “overflowing visionary images.”<sup>53</sup> The *Gaṇḍavyūha-sūtra* is the final “chapter” of the *Avataṃsaka* and one of two *sūtras* in the collection that survive in Sanskrit, Luis Gómez describes as “emblematic of the whole collection.”<sup>54</sup> As Gómez notes,

The grandeur of its vision is achieved through an original combination and poetic elaboration of earlier notions of (1) the visionary powers of meditation, (2) causal interdependence, (3) the equality or sameness of all things in emptiness, and (4) the freedom of those who experience emptiness.<sup>55</sup>

These are themes we have already seen how many of these themes are present in the miracles discussed earlier in this chapter. Gómez states that the style of the *sūtras* that compose the *Avataṃsaka* must be described as a separate genre of Buddhist literature.<sup>56</sup> The scope and grandeur of the poetic imagination is indeed unparalleled, but this should not deter us from thinking about the literary tropes and themes that the *sūtra*'s miracles share with a wider range of Mahāyāna and non-Mahāyāna Buddhist miracle literature.

The theme of the interpenetration of all Buddhas and all Buddhafields, indeed the interpenetration of all things, is one of the main themes of the *Avataṃsaka-sūtra* and the *Gaṇḍavyūha-sūtra*. The phrase, “garland of Buddhas” (*buddha-avataṃsaka*), which gives the collection its title in non-Indian sources, also occurs in the *Prātihārya-sūtra* of the *Divyāvadāna* as a phrase used to describe the multiplication miracle whereby Buddha-images seated upon jeweled lotus flowers fill the sky. While nothing like those in the *Avataṃsaka-sūtra* in scope, the types of crescendos of miracles that one finds in other miracle stories may form one important precursor of the prolixity of the *Avataṃsaka-sūtra*. Having accepted the basic premise of many Buddhas and many Buddhafields, the

*Avataṃsaka-sūtra* goes perhaps even further than other Mahāyāna *sūtras* in emphasizing the interdependence of all these Buddhas and Buddhafields.

As stated above, the culminating episode of the *Gaṇḍavyūha* is a vision by Sudhana of Maitreya in a tower named “the womb of the adornments of the marvelous arrays of Vairocana” (*Vairocanavyūhālaṃkāragarbha*). In the *Avataṃsaka-sūtra*, Vairocana is the name given to the Buddha of a Buddhafield called the Lotus Universe, which is said to contain all world systems, including ours, and simultaneously to manifest the past, present and future.<sup>57</sup> Thus, the great tower becomes a symbol not only for the equality and simultaneous interpenetration of all Buddhas and Buddhafields, but also for the interpenetration of all things within one thing and one thing within all things. In the buildup to the vision, Sudhana describes at length the beings who reside in the tower:

Here, [the Bodhisattvas] pervade without remainder every direction with clouds of emanations equal to the number of worlds that serve as a basis for Bodhisattvas....

Here, those who abide in the abode of meditation, who roam in the abode of liberation, see the three times on the point of a single moment....

Here, those whose minds are unobstructed think of the number of all the Buddhas, the number of all Buddhafields, of all eons, and verily of all phenomena....

Here, those who abide dwelling in the abode of the offspring of the conquerors see, in all their differences, the activities of the Buddhas and the aspirations and faculties of the worlds....

Here, they perceive the essence of phenomena and of all Buddhas, eons, times, and Buddhafields as being devoid of the essence of being, due to their nonarising.

Abiding here, having seen the sameness of all beings and the sameness all Buddhas within phenomena, they penetrate the sameness of the three times, the sameness of Buddhafields and the sameness of vows.<sup>58</sup>

These verses, selected from among many possible citations, touch on the themes of this chapter. They show how the Bodhisattva dwells in the inconceivable domain of the Buddhas while simultaneously manifesting innumerable magical emanations that dwell among countless worlds. The past, present and future are equally present in a single moment, just as all things are reflected in a single thing. The innumerable Buddhas and Buddhafields are seen here to be equal in their ultimate emptiness, but without diminishing their infinite variety.

Sudhana's vision manifests these truths in graphic detail. As he steps into the tower at the direction of Maitreya, Sudhana sees innumerable towers, each distinct, yet reflected in each of the other towers. In various towers, he sees Maitreya performing miracles while practicing various stages of the Bodhisattva path at various points in time. He also sees himself bowing before Maitreya in each of the towers, similar to how Bhadra sees himself bowing before the Buddha in the *Bhadramāyākāravvyākaraṇa*. Sudhana sees myriad arrays of Buddhas and Buddhafields. In one tower, he sees Bodhisattvas dwelling in a state of meditation that produces magical emanations. He sees clouds of emanations flowing from each and every pore of the bodies of those Bodhisattvas and going throughout various universes teaching the Dharma. He hears disembodied voices all around him describing countless Bodhisattvas and Buddhas practicing the path and teaching the Dharma. Towards the end of Sudhana's miraculous vision comes this simile:

Just as though there were a palace of Great Brahmās called “the womb of the best array of all worlds,” where the entire three-thousand-great-thousand world-system is reflected [in each individual thing] while each individual thing remains distinct, in the same way, Sudhana, the merchant's son, obtained [a vision of] the reflection of all the arrays [of world-systems], separately and distinctly, in all individual things.<sup>59</sup>

Sudhana sees all things reflected in each thing, and each thing reflected in all things. The tower is a spatiotemporal representation of the state of inconceivable liberation, the state of meditation of the liberated Buddhas and Bodhisattvas who reside in it. Yet, it also is a metaphor for the nature of reality. At the end of the vision, Maitreya enters the tower and withdraws the superhuman power of his intention (*adhiṣṭhāna*) with the snap of his finger, and says to Sudhana:

Arise, good man, this is nature of things (*eṣā dharmāṇām dharmatā*). Good man, the Bodhisattva is established in the knowledge that all things are characterized by [their] involvement in magical creation (*viṣṭhapana-pratyupasthāna-lakṣaṇa*). [All things] are thus like a magical illusion (*māyā*), a dream and a reflection, lacking any essential nature (*svabhāva-apariniṣpannā*).<sup>60</sup>

Like Śāriputra in the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, Sudhana then asks where the marvelous vision has gone, and from where it came. Maitreya responds by saying that the vision came from the superhuman power of intention (*adhiṣṭhāna*) derived from the knowledge (*jñāna*) of the Bodhisattvas, and dwells in that superhuman power of intention. Maitreya continues,

Good man, just as the magician manifests his magical illusions, which do not come from anywhere, go anywhere or traverse anywhere, but appear to do so by the power of magical spells or drugs, in the same way, these marvelous arrays do not go anywhere, nor do they come from anywhere, nor do they come together, but appear to do so, through the force of the knowledge and superhuman powers of intention resulting from past vows fulfilled by perfecting the magic of the inconceivable knowledge of the Bodhisattvas.<sup>61</sup>

Maitreya grants Sudhana a miraculous vision of reality as it appears from the perspective of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas who dwell in inconceivable liberation. Among the themes that one finds interwoven into the vision are the equality of all Buddhas and Buddhafields in emptiness, the causal interdependence of all things, the reflection of all things in one thing and vice versa, as well as the presence of eternity within a moment.

The coterminous presence of multiplicity and nonduality symbolized by the tower is supported by a doctrine of universal illusion. As before, the metaphor of the magical illusion becomes a bridge between the conventional and the ultimate levels of truth.

### Conclusion

The polemical concern in Mahāyāna literature for distinguishing the Bodhisattva ethos from what Mahāyāna texts call the “lesser aspiration” (*hīnāśaya*) of the disciples may be one of the causes for the emphasis on the acquisition and use of superhuman powers. According to Mahāyāna rhetoric, while the disciples seek to attain their own release before realizing all the attainments of a Buddha, Bodhisattvas vow to remain in the realm of rebirth and strive to generate merit through the perfection of certain virtues like generosity, meditation and wisdom in order to achieve the total and complete awakening of the Buddhas. Bodhisattvas do this because of their “great compassion” (*mahākaruṇā*) for other beings. The greater their superhuman powers, the more people they can serve.

Once they have achieved the most advanced stages of the Bodhisattva path, Bodhisattvas become virtually indistinguishable from Buddhas in terms of their superhuman power and knowledge. They have achieved great superhuman power and knowledge, and use this power and knowledge to perform miraculous displays that help others and convert them to Buddhism. Even the appearance of such advanced beings in our universe is miraculous. Buddhas and advanced Bodhisattvas abide in the transcendent “plane of Dharma” (*dharmadhātu*) in a state that is “not fixed” (*apraṭiṣṭhita*) in either *samsāra* or *nirvāṇa*. This state is neither mundane nor transcendent, but simultaneously

involves both. Such Bodhisattvas are able to appear magically in different forms in various realms of rebirth and paradises, while remaining merged with the transcendent, inconceivable *dharmadhātu*.

In the expanded Mahāyāna view of the cosmos, Buddhas reside in various “world-systems” throughout the universe. The theory of the three bodies contributes to the discourse on miracles and superhuman powers by offering an account of how Buddhas and advanced Bodhisattvas can appear in different forms in various mundane realms and in the transmudane realm simultaneously. For this purpose, the multiplication miracle perhaps provided an important paradigm. The theory also helps to explain the identity and equality of all the Buddhas of the present, past and future. The message of the *Gaṇḍavyūha*, exemplified by Sudhana’s miraculous vision of the tower, goes even further in stressing the identity and interpenetration of all Buddhas and all “Buddha-fields” within the universe of Vairocana.

Some Mahāyāna scriptures also argue for the ultimate sameness of all things, and more paradoxically, for the ultimate non-arising of all conditioned phenomena. These doctrines perhaps derive from the doctrine that all conditioned things are insubstantial and therefore empty of essential nature. Nāgārjuna may argue in the *Vigrahavyavartanī* and *Mūlamadhyamaka-kārikā* that emptiness is also empty, underlining the idea that all things are conditioned by other things, but even Nāgārjuna himself identifies cause and effect with magical illusion. Mahāyāna *sūtras* identify emptiness as the unifying, underlying nature of all things.

In Mahāyāna literature, Buddhas and advanced Bodhisattvas are sometimes likened to magicians. As magicians, they are able to manipulate reality, because they understand that reality is like a magical illusion. Such a conception also feeds into

treatments of the metaphor of the magician in Buddhist Tantra, while the general treatment of miracles and superhuman powers in Mahāyāna literature helps to establish a philosophical and doctrinal foundation for the later Tantric conception of the Great Adepts or *Mahāsiddhas*. The Tantric context deserves a separate and detailed treatment, in part because it is heir to many elements that are common to more than one South Asian religious tradition. Yet, the Tantric figure of the iconoclastic trickster, flaunting conventions, would seem to owe something to the development of the metaphors of the magician and the magical illusion in Mahāyāna literature.<sup>62</sup>

While both apophatic and cataphatic tendencies are apparent in Mahāyāna descriptions of the ultimate nature of things, the magical illusion offers a useful metaphor for characterizing reality in multiple ways at the same time. The magical illusion is one of several metaphors used to describe the insubstantiality of conditioned phenomena found in Mahāyāna and non-Mahāyāna literature alike, but it seems particularly amenable to the Mahāyāna rhetoric of the two truths, where the conventional truth that all conditioned things arise in dependence on causes and conditions leads to the insight that all things are ultimately empty. Mahāyāna miracle stories employ the rhetoric of the two truths in a way that is both playful and creative.

Thus, while sharing some of the literary and important doctrinal components of miracles discussed in previous chapters, particularly multiplication miracles and miraculous visions of other worlds, the miracles selected for discussion in this chapter demonstrate doctrines characteristic of Mahāyāna Buddhist texts. Extremely rich in doctrinal content, some of them emphasize the paradoxical interpenetration of all phenomena in emptiness and the inconceivable state of being in which everything resides. Buddhas and advanced Bodhisattvas have achieved the state of “inconceivable

liberation,” and their miracles convert and exhort others by giving them a vision of reality as conceived from the ultimate level of awareness.

At the outset of the present work, I argued that the concept of the miracle is an appropriate one to use in the context of Buddhist literature, partly because Buddhists make a clear distinction between miracles and magic. Often, the context for such a distinction is polemical insofar as the literature tries to establish the superior holiness of the Buddha, and his eminent disciples, teachings, and institutions. The miracle of teaching the Dharma is set against the magical powers of non-Buddhist ascetics, who remain trapped in rebirth in spite of their powers. In Mahāyāna literature, however, we have seen that the distinction between miracles and magic becomes increasingly difficult to maintain. For, in Mahāyāna literature, Buddhas and advanced Bodhisattvas liberate with their magic both themselves and others, because they understand that magical illusion is a metaphor for the nature of reality.

Thus, Mahāyāna literature brings to a head the hermeneutic challenges to understanding the South Asian Buddhist discourse on miracles and superhuman powers and then conveying this understanding to an English-speaking audience. How are we to interpret and then translate technical terms like *ṛddhi*, *vikurvaṇa* and *adhiṭṭhāna* in a Mahāyāna context? Are they best described as miraculous powers, magical powers, or superhuman powers? All of these translations are roughly appropriate, but none of them is fully satisfying. Nor can they convey the subtleties of these terms. By emphasizing the metaphors of the magician and magical illusion, Mahāyāna literature goes some way towards resolving the tension between superhuman powers and knowledge of the nature of reality. Yet, by doing so, it also seems to undermine the opposition between miracles and magic.



<sup>1</sup> In my usage, non-Mahāyāna refers to South Asian Buddhist literature that is not explicitly Mahāyāna or based on it (i.e., Tantra). Under the category of non-Mahāyāna, I group together South Asian Buddhist literature from both the Sanskrit and Pāli traditions. I also sometimes call non-Mahāyāna “mainstream Buddhism,” which is to say that Mahāyāna is an offshoot or development of the mainline traditions. This is not to say that there is always a clear divide between Mahāyāna and non-Mahāyāna literature, as Jan Nattier’s translation and study of the *Ugra-paripṛcchā* suggests. See Nattier 2003.

<sup>2</sup> This is still not what most textbooks in Buddhist studies are saying, but it seems to me to be a logical step to take from the recent work that has been done on the development of Mahāyāna literature. Nattier’s work is a good example of this recent work. See also Silk 1994 and 2002. See also Harrison 1987b. Another significant voice in the contemporary scholarly discussion of the development of Mahāyāna and its relationship to non-Mahāyāna is that of Gregory Schopen. See, for instance, Schopen 1979 and 2000. Schopen 1997 and 2004 contains many other useful articles. If, as Schopen and others have argued, Mahāyāna developed slowly within and possibly alongside the mainstream Buddhist monastic institutions for several centuries, it stands to reason that Mahāyāna and non-Mahāyāna literature would have an influence on each other to some extent.

<sup>3</sup> Mil: 236ff.

<sup>4</sup> Mil: 239. The text quotes a common stock of epithets of the Buddha. See, for instance, D ii.15.

<sup>5</sup> Ppp: 4ff.

<sup>6</sup> Sdp: 149ff.

<sup>7</sup> The stark contrast between these passages in the *Milindapañha* and the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* is well illustrated in Donald Lopez’s edited volume, *Buddhist Scriptures*, where they appear one after the other. See Lopez 2004: 46-59.

<sup>8</sup> For references to the theory of the three bodies, see Siddhi: 764-772.

<sup>9</sup> Vkn: 93. Page number references to the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* correspond to the 2006 edition.

<sup>10</sup> Skilling 2008.

<sup>11</sup> DhA iii.225.

<sup>12</sup> See John Strong’s forthcoming article, “The Triple Ladder at Saṃkāśya.”

<sup>13</sup> Strong sees the performance of the Twin Miracle as emphasizing the superiority of the Buddha, he sees the descent from the heaven of the Thirty-three as putting humans, gods, *and* the Buddha on the same level. He asks a simple question, why did the Buddha and the gods choose to walk down when they could have flown? It seems true that insofar as the Buddha and the gods walk down on the staircase, they come down to the level of ordinary humans. In this sense, perhaps, one could argue that the Buddha is coming down to the level of gods and men, and yet for me the Buddha of the story remains set apart by nature of being the focus for their awe, devotion and aspiration.

<sup>14</sup> Bbh: 41.

<sup>15</sup> Translated in Chang 1983.

<sup>16</sup> The *Ratnakūṭa* collection contains a *sūtra* describing Akṣobhya, his former vows, and his present Buddhahood. The translation into Chinese by Bodhiruci is Taishō 310, *sūtra* 6. English translation of this version is found in Chang 1983: 315-338. The description of the three staircases is found on pages 325-326.

<sup>17</sup> Vkn: 12.

<sup>18</sup> Lamotte, *Traité*, vol. 1, p. 15, n. 2. In the *Upālisutta* (M i.375), a rival ascetic claims, “For the ascetic Gotama is a magician. He knows the concealing magic by which he deceives the disciples of other ascetics’ teachers” (*samaṇo hi bhante Gotamo māyāvī. āvaṭṭaniṃ māyaṃ jānāti yāya aññatitthiyānaṃ sāvake āvaṭṭeti*).

<sup>19</sup> *Traite*, vol 1, p. 16. Kośa, vol. 3, p. 30.

<sup>20</sup> ThgA i.53-55. This story is briefly recounted and discussed in Strong 1983 [2008].

<sup>21</sup> S iii.140. DhP, verses 46, 170.

<sup>22</sup> See *Traité*, vol. 1, p. 358. Gómez 1977: 231.

<sup>23</sup> MMK: 24.

<sup>24</sup> D iii.12-27.

<sup>25</sup> Régamey 1938 [1990]. Régamey published an edition of the Tibetan text with an annotated English translation that also gives alternate readings in the two Chinese translations. In what follows, I refer to Régamey’s Tibetan edition and English translation, and to the English translation in Chang 1983 of Bodhiruci’s Chinese translation, the later of the two Chinese translations.

<sup>26</sup> The two Chinese translations and the Tibetan translation of the conversion of Bhadra all tell a nearly identical story. An alternate Khotanese version of the story of Bhadra's conversion is preserved in two long fragments that were edited and translated into German by Ernst Leumann in the 1930s. Although similar in many respects to the Chinese and Tibetan translations of the story found in the *Ratnakūṭa* collection, this Khotanese version differs from them in some crucial respects and seems to be an independent telling of the tale. Leumann, *Abhandlungen für die Kunde des Morgenlandes*, vol. 20, Leipzig 1933-1936.

<sup>27</sup> The *Bhadramāyākāra-vyākaraṇa* is characterized as a Mahāyāna scripture in its Tibetan translation, and included in the collection of Mahāyāna scriptures known as the *Mahāratnakūṭa*. The narrative theme of prophecy features in quite a few Mahāyāna scriptures.

<sup>28</sup> DhA i.434ff. This similarity of the plotline of the *Bhadramāyākāra-vyākāraṇa* to the Pali legend has been recognized and studied by both Ernst Leumann and Constanty Régamey. The latter's work is cited by Lamotte in the *Traité*, vol 1, p. 16.

<sup>29</sup> The expression used in the text is *ñāṇa-anubhāva*, which could perhaps be taken as a dual compound meaning one who possesses [superhuman] knowledge and majestic, powerful presence.

<sup>30</sup> This story shares many other tropes familiar from other miracle tales including the theme of lotus flower seats. The theme of lotus flowers miraculously appearing for the Buddha is found in various forms in many different stories. Buddhist iconography also features the image of Buddhas sitting on lotus flowers. The lotus flower could be said to represent the simultaneous immanence and the transcendence nature of the Buddha.

<sup>31</sup> Régamey 1990: 20 and 59. I supply Sanskrit alternatives for these Tibetan terms not because a Sanskrit text is available for the *Bhadramāyākāravākāraṇa*, but because they are common alternatives attested elsewhere.

<sup>32</sup> While Bhadra is featured as the only rival of the Buddha in the Tibetan and Chinese versions, in the Khotanese version, Bhadra is depicted as one of several rivals of the Buddha, including the Jain leader and others like Makhali Gosala, who take council together to plan the fake feast. This is a narrative feature that the Khotanese version of the conversion of Bhadra shares with other stories, like the story of the miracles of Śrāvastī. One sees here the fluidity of narrative components used to tell stories that feature the theme of the test of superhuman knowledge and power

<sup>33</sup> After Bhadra leaves, Maudgalyāyana (or Aniruddha in the Khotanese version), who has also perceived Bhadra's intention, attempts to warn the Buddha. But the Buddha reassures him, saying that he, too, has correctly perceived Bhadra's intentions and means to convert him.

<sup>34</sup> Leumann 1933-36: 16-17.

<sup>35</sup> *Anusmṛti* means remembering or recalling, but is also used in the sense of calling or bringing something to mind.

<sup>36</sup> Lamotte 1962: iii.

<sup>37</sup> Thurman 1976: ix.

<sup>38</sup> Vkn: 14. For discussion and references for the meaning of *viṭhapana*, see Lamotte 1962, 124-125. BHSD, p. 486.

<sup>39</sup> Vkn: 9. The precise wording of this metaphor has been a source of confusion, and it was interpreted and translated in different ways by the Chinese and Tibetan translators. Or, the Chinese and Tibetan translators had access to slightly different texts. Here is the wording in the Sanskrit version: *tadyathā ratnākāra yādṛśaṃ icched ākāśaṃ māpayituṃ tādrśyaṃ māpeta na cākāśaṃ śakyate māpayituṃ hāpi alaṃkartum | evam eva ratnākāra ākāśasamān sarvadharmān jñātvā yādṛśaṃ icched bodhisatvaḥ satvapariṣkāya buddhakṣetraṃ māpayituṃ tādrśyaṃ buddhakṣetraṃ māpayati na ca buddhakṣetrākāśatā śakyam māpayituṃ nāpi alaṃkartum |*

<sup>40</sup> Vkn: 17.

<sup>41</sup> Vkn: 17.

<sup>42</sup> Vkn: 18-19.

<sup>43</sup> Vkn: 46-47.

<sup>44</sup> Vkn: 33-34.

<sup>45</sup> Vkn: 34. The Sanskrit here seems to follow the Tibetan, whereas Lamotte suggests that the Chinese translations may have possessed a variant reading whereby the negative qualities are applied to the living beings, not to the Buddha. For discussion and references to the five corruptions, see Lamotte 1962: 188.

<sup>46</sup> Vkn: 97. The text uses the term *pratisamhṛtya* (prati + sam + ḥṛ) in the sense of "holding back." One wonders if this word might be chosen poetically in place of *samvṛti* (sam + vṛ), which has the sense of

concealment, hiding. The latter is a common term for the conventional truth. In any case, the text uses the same word, *pratisamhr*, earlier to describe when the Buddha “withdraws” (*pratisamharati*) his superhuman power (*rddhi*) to conclude the miraculous vision at the end of the miracle in chapter one.

<sup>47</sup> Vkn: 74.

<sup>48</sup> Vkn: 110-111.

<sup>49</sup> Vkn: 69.

<sup>50</sup> Vkn: 58-61.

<sup>51</sup> The episode has been discussed in detail in Gómez 1977: 235-244.

<sup>52</sup> Gómez 1977: 224

<sup>53</sup> Paul Demiéville in Renou and Filliozat 1953: 434. Cited and translated in Gómez 1993: 161.

<sup>54</sup> Gómez: 1993: 164.

<sup>55</sup> Gómez: 1993: 161.

<sup>56</sup> Gómez: 1993: 169.

<sup>57</sup> Gómez 1993: 161.

<sup>58</sup> Gv: 376-377. The verses translated here are numbered 37, 42, 45, 47, 50 and 51.

<sup>59</sup> Gv: 415.

<sup>60</sup> Gv: 415.

<sup>61</sup> Gv: 416. The final passage is difficult to interpret. The Sanskrit reads: “*saṃdrśyate ca acintyabodhisattvajñānamāyāsusīkṣitvāt pūrvaprañidhānādhiṣṭhānājñānavaśitayā.*”

<sup>62</sup> There is more work to be done elucidating the treatment of these metaphors in Mahāyāna *śāstra* literature. For instance, on the “earlier” side, the *Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra* contains a few references to the metaphors of the magician and the magical illusion. See, for instance, chapter thirteen, verse 28, where the wisdom of the bodhisattva is likened to that a magician, who understands the true nature of his illusions. See also chapter eleven, verse 27ff, for a discussion of the metaphor of the magical illusion. See MSA: 61ff, 89. On the “later” side, one may mention ninth chapter of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, verses five and following, where the meaning and significance of the metaphor of the magical illusion is elaborated in the context of the two truths. See BA: 101ff.

## Chapter VI

### Final Reflections

The present work demonstrates the conceptual relationship that exists between “miracles” (*pāṭihāriya*, *prātihārya*) and “superhuman powers” (*iddhi*, *rddhi*) in South Asian Buddhist literature. While it might seem obvious that miracles and superhuman powers would be related, there is more to the concept of the Buddhist miracle than the mere marvelous display of superhuman powers. Indeed, some Buddhist texts, like the *Kevaṭṭa-sutta*, suggest that there is little, if anything, to distinguish between displays of superhuman powers and magic. Such passages have led scholars to conclude that the concept of the miracle is foreign to Buddhist discourse. Rather than concluding from criticisms of such displays that it is inappropriate or misleading to speak of miracles in Buddhism, the present work argues the opposite. It is precisely in the critique of displaying superhuman powers that the religious significance of the miracle becomes apparent through its separation from magic.

This is not to say, however, that Buddhist literature clearly maintains the traditional Western distinction between magic as a technique of power and miracle as evidence of holiness.<sup>1</sup> Exhibitions of superhuman power are often portrayed as evidence of holiness in Buddhist literature. Superhuman powers of various kinds result from

developing the techniques of meditation that lead to the attainment of the highest goals of the Buddhist path. Yet, marvelous exhibitions are also achievable through the use of magical charms and amulets the possession of which does not require any particular spiritual development. In a way that evokes comparisons with Western theological discussions of the problem of discerning between the divine and the diabolical,<sup>2</sup> the display of superhuman powers in a South Asian religious context raises the problem of discerning miracles from magic.

The problem of discerning miracles from magic in a South Asian context derives in part from the fact that other South Asian religious traditions, such as the Yoga and Jain traditions, shared with the Buddhists a belief in the connection between meditation and the acquisition of various types of superhuman knowledge and power. In the *Yoga-sūtra* of Patañjali, for instance, superhuman powers are also claimed to be the result of advanced yogic practice.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the Jains claimed that their leader, the Mahāvīra, possessed omniscience.<sup>4</sup> The acceptance of the extraordinary powers of saints was so widespread in classical South Asia that concepts such as heightened yogic perception and omniscience were invoked in metaphysical and logical debates that took place among various Buddhist and non-Buddhist philosophical schools.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the question for South Asian Buddhists, as for the proponents of other South Asian religious traditions, became the following: what is unique about our tradition? What makes our saints superior to those of other, competing religious traditions?

The distinction between common or mundane types of superhuman powers and those that are noble or transcendent offers one way that Buddhists sought to answer this question. According to some South Asian Buddhist scholastic texts, while even non-

Buddhists could theoretically achieve common or mundane types of superhuman power, including powers like levitation and so forth, only Buddhists could achieve noble superhuman powers. Whereas many Pāli texts conceive noble superhuman power in terms of detachment, leading to cessation of suffering, the *Śrāvakahūmi* explicitly compares the product of mundane superhuman powers to a magician's illusions. The text maintains that Buddhists with noble superhuman powers, by contrast, can conjure objects that are real. What we see in such distinctions is the assumption by South Asian Buddhists of the ubiquity of superhuman powers among the adepts of various religious traditions, and the attempt to say what constitutes the preeminence of the Buddhist path.

Yet, the distinction between miracle and magic in a South Asian Buddhist context is not always a question of the techniques employed, but of the reasons for employing them. Buddhas, Arhats and Bodhisattvas display their superhuman knowledge and powers in order to lead others to achieve freedom from suffering and rebirth, while lesser adepts and non-Buddhists might utilize their powers for more mundane motives. One can understand the monastic rule prohibiting the display of superhuman powers in front of laypeople in this context. Despite the fact that the Buddha directs the members of his monastic community to live “with their sins exposed and their virtues concealed,” and thus to avoid ostentatious displays of their superhuman powers, this does not stop the Buddha and his disciples from displaying their superhuman powers on many occasions when the situation is deemed appropriate.

Scholars have long recognized that the problem of the ubiquity of claims to possess magical powers lies behind the criticism in the *Kevaṭṭa-sutta* of displaying superhuman powers. As Luis Gómez points out,

The significance of this passage [in the *Kevaṭṭa-sutta*] can be readily grasped if one remembers that even before the Buddhist claimed to possess magical powers, many other, if not all, wandering ascetics presented their wonder-working abilities as proof of their spiritual achievement. In this respect, therefore, Buddhist and non-Buddhist were indistinguishable.<sup>6</sup>

Gómez emphasizes the widespread, pan-Indian belief in magic and wonderworking abilities. Yet, Gómez also suggests, albeit with some reservations, that such passages are “rationalistic.”<sup>7</sup> It may be that the *Kevaṭṭa-sutta* is speaking metaphorically when it calls teaching the Dharma a miracle, raising the possibility that the passage expresses a form of Buddhist rationalism. On the other hand, one can see in the text an attempt to detach the concept of the miraculous from magical powers, a theological move that may be analogous in some respects to the process by which the miracle, in the form of the Eucharist, came to occupy a central place in Christian ritual practice.<sup>8</sup>

The present study may thus have broader implications for assessing the conception of miracles and magic in other South Asian religious traditions roughly contemporaneous with Buddhism and for gaining a new perspective on Western categories of miracle and magic. The reverse is also true: this analysis of South Asian Buddhist discourse on the miraculous would benefit from detailed exploration of the broader South Asian religious context and from more direct engagement with the long history of tension between miracles and magic in Western discourse. These are directions that I hope to pursue in my future research as I revise the present study for publication as a monograph. For the moment, however, the insights that such a broader investigation might reveal must remain inchoate and preliminary.

One of the preliminary conclusions that I think we can draw from the present study relates to the problem of characterizing Buddhist conceptions of the miraculous

according to doxographical classification, monastic affiliation or the distinction between popular and elite forms of the religion. At one point in the first volume of his monumental translation of the *Prajñāpāramita-śāstra*, Lamotte calls the Theravāda and Sarvāstivāda “rationalistic” and the Mahāsāṅghika and Mahāyāna “supernaturalistic.”<sup>9</sup> A few pages later Lamotte again connects Theravāda to Sarvāstivāda when he writes,

However marvelous his powers may have been, the Buddha was considered to be an ordinary man, not just by his enemies, the heretics [sic], but also by his first disciples, the Theras, who compiled the canonical writings and elaborated Sarvāstivādin scholasticism.<sup>10</sup>

From these statements, Lamotte seems to consider the Theravādins and Sarvāstivādins to be rationalistic, because they viewed the Buddha as an ordinary man. Yet, what does Lamotte mean when he says that the Buddha was seen by them as an ordinary man in spite of his possession of marvelous powers? Could the early Buddhists have been rationalistic and still believe that the Buddha possessed various types of superhuman knowledge and power? What are the terms by which one distinguishes between “rationalism” and “supernaturalism” in Buddhism?<sup>11</sup> I hope that the preceding chapters of the present work have suggested some ways in which such questions as these might be addressed in a more nuanced fashion than one may achieve simply through the rough characterization of South Asian Buddhism by means of doxographical classifications.

There may be some value in contrasting Mahāyāna and non-Mahāyāna discourse on miracles and superhuman powers, but one should be careful not to draw too sharp a contrast. Implicit in Lamotte’s characterization is the view that the “supernatural” tendencies of Mahāyāna derive from the popular stratum, whereas Buddhist “rationalism” arises from the elites. Although the context is entirely different, Lamotte’s perspective is akin to the traditional view of the connection between magical belief and popular religion,



which Peter Brown and others have sought to undermine in the context of Christian Europe. This similarity ought to make us to pause before we proceed to characterize the development of early Buddhist notions of the Buddha in such broad brushstrokes.

The stories and scholastic treatises analyzed throughout this study have been primarily those of dominant Buddhist monastic lineages in South Asia, such as the Theravāda, Sarvāstivāda and Mahāsāṅghika. In contrast to these monastic designations is Mahāyāna, which does not refer to any specific monastic lineage, but bears the influence of several. Despite using doxographical categories to identify specific texts and versions of stories, I have generally avoided aligning particular positions on the efficacy of miraculous displays of superhuman powers with any particular Buddhist affiliations. I have resisted characterizing a Theravāda position or a Sarvāstivāda position, though at times I have drawn rough sketches of Mahāyāna and non-Mahāyāna positions.

Such generalizations can offer an impressionistic overview, but they can also mislead us. The discourse is more complicated and the voices more varied than one can imply by aligning particular positions with particular sectarian affiliations. When considering South Asian Buddhist discourse on the significance of superhuman powers and their display, it is never easy to decide what position or positions to characterize as mainstream. It strikes me as reasonable to think that Buddhists could have maintained different views at the same time on the significance of superhuman powers and their display, irrespective of monastic affiliations.

There are differences between the *Kevaṭṭa-sutta* and the Pāli commentaries on the issue of the efficacy of miraculous displays of superhuman power. A moderate position that such displays are efficacious for initial conversion is also present in the *Abhidharmakośa*, an ostensibly Sarvāstivāda scholastic treatise. Comparing different

versions of the Buddha's early conversions—found in the Pāli *Mahāvagga*, the *Catuśpariṣat-sūtra*, and the *Vinaya* collections of other Buddhist schools—shows how complex the question of the value and function of displaying superhuman powers could be. This complexity resulted in ambiguities and ambivalence, rather than clear and obvious distinctions. Thus, how one chooses to characterize the different Buddhist traditions when it comes to the discourse on miracles and superhuman powers depends significantly on what texts one chooses to focus on.

While certain Pāli and Sanskrit traditions seem to maintain that teaching the Dharma is the best kind of miracle, it is also possible to find passages in Pāli and Sanskrit that emphasize the Buddha's superiority by emphasizing his raw superhuman power. The idea that teaching the Dharma is the greatest kind of miracle in Buddhism and the idea that the Buddha's superhuman powers are the greatest of any being are not mutually exclusive. They are simply different ways of illustrating the superiority of the Buddha, and one may find both of them emphasized in the same narrative.

The ability of a Buddha or particular Bodhisattva to exert dominance over non-Buddhists or lesser Buddhists is one type of proof of the superiority of his or her attainments. Instances of this type of dominance, for example in the story of the conversion of the three Kāśyapa brothers in the *Mahāvastu*, in contrast to other versions of the story, deemphasize the separation between magic and miracles. There are some affinities between this way of establishing the superiority of the Buddha and what one finds in Mahāyāna literature. Take, for instance, the story of the conversion of the magician Bhadra. In that story, the Buddha asserts his dominance over Bhadra by showing him, and then teaching him, that reality is like a magical illusion.

The present study relies in part on setting up an opposition between miracles and magic and then deconstructing it. Mahāyāna literature is crucial in this regard, for according to the Mahāyāna scriptures and scholastic treatises selected for analysis, not only are miraculous displays of superhuman power effective for conversion, they illustrate basic doctrinal insights. Collapsing the distinction between miracles and magic, the Buddha becomes characterized as the supreme magician, who manipulates reality because he understands that reality is a magical illusion. In this way, miracles in Mahāyāna literature do more than exhibit the superhuman powers of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. They illustrate or express a fundamental truth about the nature of reality that transcends the mundane.

As Luis Gómez suggests with respect to the *Avataṃsaka-sūtra*:

The doctrine of the Buddha's extraordinary psychic powers does not eclipse the *sūtra*'s religious and ethical message: the metaphor of the Buddha as magician in fact reveals the nature of liberation and asserts its power.<sup>12</sup>

This is an insight that holds for miracles in Mahāyāna literature more generally. Magical illusion emerges as a metaphor for the insubstantiality and selflessness of reality, but becomes associated with the activities of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. The Buddha's magical powers and his understanding of the nature of reality are no longer two separate things, but inextricable components of his inconceivable liberation. Teaching the Dharma and displaying superhuman powers are no longer distinctly separate types of action, but two aspects of the same event. Thus, in Mahāyāna literature, the metaphor of the magician does not diminish, but instead heightens, the religious significance of the miraculous exhibitions of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. In doing so, Mahāyāna literature leads one to question once again the adequacy of the terms miracle and magic for

describing key terms in South Asian Buddhist discourse. Were one not to use such terms, however, what others would better convey this discourse to an English-speaking audience?

Finally, since Buddhist miracle stories often encourage readers to identify with the characters in the story, attempting to efface the distinction between witnessing miraculous events and hearing accounts of them, we must remind ourselves that the literary and ideal worlds constructed by these stories only imperfectly and incompletely reflect an actual lived world outside the texts. The stories themselves mediate between an actual world and the world of meaning, and this fact should make us pause before slipping too easily from the appreciation of Buddhist miracle stories to making claims about the broader significance of such stories in South Asian Buddhist cultures. Expanding the scope of the present analysis to engage more directly not only with the wider South Asian and Western contexts, but also with the dimensions of Buddhist art, ritual, and pilgrimage, may enable one to make such claims. Nevertheless, this study has begun to show not only the relevance of the concepts of miracle, magic and superhuman power for understanding South Asian Buddhist narrative and scholastic literature, but also the importance of South Asian Buddhist literature for a deeper assessment of these concepts.

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<sup>1</sup> Indeed, this separation is not always clearly maintained in practice in a Western context. Take, for instance, the miracles of St. Francis of Assisi. See Sabatier 1902.

<sup>2</sup> A central figure in this regard is the 15<sup>th</sup> century Parisian scholar, Jean Gerson. A good introduction to his ideas about discernment is Nancy Caciola's recent study, *Discerning Spirits*. Caciola 2006.

<sup>3</sup> The third chapter of the *Yoga-sūtra* goes into detail on the types of superhuman powers attainable through yogic practice. For a translation and commentary, see Stoler Miller 1998: 60-73.

<sup>4</sup> Dundas 1992: 88-89. Although some Buddhists apparently rejected the idea that the Buddha is omniscient, choosing instead to emphasize the formula of the three types of knowledge as the content of his awakening, omniscience is a quality often associated with the awakening of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.

<sup>5</sup> Among the classical schools of Indian philosophy, only the Mīmāṃsakas and the Lokāyatās rejected yogic perception. For an interesting set of abstracts from a 2006 conference on yogic perception, organized by Eli Franco, see [http://ikga.oeaw.ac.at/Events/yogic\\_symp06/abstracts.htm](http://ikga.oeaw.ac.at/Events/yogic_symp06/abstracts.htm).

<sup>6</sup> Gómez 1977: 221.

<sup>7</sup> Gómez 1977: 221. The PED seems to interpret the passage in a similar fashion when it speaks of the Buddhist "miracle of education." See PED under *iddhi*.

<sup>8</sup> I owe this suggestion to Diane Owen Hughes, who recently brought to my attention Valerie Flint's study of magic in the Early Middle Ages. See Flint 1993. Professor Owen Hughes did not draw a specific parallel between the *Kevaṭṭa-sutta* and the Eucharist, but suggested the general comparison. A recent study that I have not yet been able to see is Robert Bartlett's *The Natural and the Supernatural in the Middle Ages*. See Bartlett 2008.

<sup>9</sup> *Traité*, vol. 1, p. 10, n. 3. The comment occurs at the end of a four page footnote on the life of the Buddha that begins on page 6.

<sup>10</sup> *Traité*, vol. 1, p. 18, n. 2.

<sup>11</sup> In a later volume, Lamotte seems to shy away from using the term supernatural in reference to Buddhism. See *Traité*, vol. 4, p. 1814. Yet, he continues to use the terminology of the miraculous in his translation of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*. Lamotte's inconsistencies exemplify the hermeneutical problem that we face in attempting to understand the South Asian Buddhist discourse on miracles and superhuman powers.

<sup>12</sup> Gómez 1993: 166.

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