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Buddhism and special divine action

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1. Historical and Legendary Outline

Buddhism is a complex religious system that emerged in South Asia in the period between mid-5th to mid-4th century BCE, with the missionary activities of its historical founder Siddhārtha Gautama (P.: Siddhattha Gotama, or ‘the one who has accomplished his goal’) Śākyamuni (P.: Sakkamuni, or ‘the sage of the Śākya clan’), who eventually came to be known as the Buddha (S. / P.; ‘the awakened one’). Still in the 20th century, the Buddha’s dates were fixed to around 566/363–486/483 BCE, however recent research favours the latter half of the 5th century BCE with ca. 410–390 as the time of his death.

The Buddha’s teachings of the four noble truths and of the middle path leading to the final cessation of universal suffering in the state of the dissolution of the mundane existence (S.: *nirvāṇa*; P.; *nibbāna*, or ‘extinguishing / blowing out’) evolved into a range of various sects and schools. In this sense, one may speak of ‘a plurality of Buddhisms’. Buddhism as religion developed also its rich philosophical tradition. It can be classified as a non-Brahmanical system, beside Jainism and Ajivikism, in the sense that it *formally* emerged in opposition to Brahmanical traditions (from Vedic religion to Hinduism).

No solid historical data or archaeological evidence is available that would allow for a reliable historical reconstruction of the Buddha’s biography, except for legends and myths. These are directly relevant to the concept of miracles, wonders and marvels in Buddhism: his biography informs a paradigm of what miracles are in Buddhism.

Siddhārtha Gautama, the most recent Buddha, is believed to have been born in a succession of Buddhas in the current aeon. The circumstances marking most important events in his life, the way they are narrated, are miraculous. Before queen Māyā (‘Miraculous Power’) conceived Siddhārtha, she saw in a dream a white elephant entering her body from the right side: Siddhārtha Gautama descended to the earth into her womb and the earth trembled, being a witness to the miracle. In a grove near Lumbinī, Māyā gave birth while standing. While the earth trembled again, the future Buddha emerged from queen Māyā’s right sight to spare her the sufferings of labour,

whereupon he, fully aware, took seven steps and proclaimed his mission to the whole world: “I am born for the awakening, for the sake of the world. This is indeed my final coming into existence.” He was born with (usually 32) wondrous marks of a great man on his body. Wise men at the royal court foretold that a leader of the humankind was born to become either a universal monarch (*cakra-vartin*) or a spiritual teacher of all (*buddha*). His father Śuddhodana decided to groom him for the role of the universal monarch as his heir. Still as a child, he was found engrossed in his first meditation under a tree which protected him from the sun with its shadow motionlessly fixed above him throughout the day. The future Buddha spent his youth in royal palace, surrounded by countless riches and pleasures. Having married princess Yaśodharā, who bore a son Rāhula, he lived in comfort, unaware of all the other ills of the world such as sickness, old age, death etc. At the age of 29, he decided to see the world beyond the palace walls. The king had all the surrounding areas cleared from anything reminiscent of afflictions and suffering, including common folk. It was only by dint of an intervention of gods, that on the road outside there occurred, on four consecutive days, an old man, a sick man, a dead man carried on a bier (all symbolising universal suffering in its various aspects) and a wandering recluse (a symbol of the spiritual path). The future Buddha abandoned his family life, leaving the palace under the cover of the night, with the bolted city gates miraculously opened for him by the gods, a scene known as Great Renunciation. In Bodhgayā, after six years of a life as a recluse, at the age of 35, prince Siddhārtha sat under a *bodhi* tree, or the fig tree of the awakening (*Ficus religiosa*), and attained the full awakening (*bodhi*), or enlightenment. The moment when he delivered his first sermon in Sārnāth, near Vārāṇasī, set the formal beginning of Buddhism as religion. In it, believed to have been preserved as the *Discourse on the Turning of the Wheel of Moral Law*, he explained the most essential elements of the Buddhist teaching such as the four noble truths, the idea of universal impermanence and the eightfold path to liberation. After 45 years of wanderings and teaching the Dharma, or i.e. moral law, he preached his last sermon known as *The Discourse on the Final Extinction* and died, attaining the final absolute liberation (*parinirvāṇa*), i.e. ‘his personal series was finally dissolved’.

2. Special divine action without God

Buddhism, beside Jainism and Ajivikism, sheds independent light on the nature and role of religion as such, and in particular on miracles, since the conceptual framework diverges from beliefs typified by Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition. These three non-Brahmanical religions provide examples of atheistic religions which do not have the a concept of God understood as a creator of the world and its prime cause, ultimate moral law giver, supreme administrator of the course of events etc., whose supramundane

and superhuman nature would be ontologically absolutely distinct from everything else in the universe.

The Buddha has never been deified in this sense, albeit he has been an object of worship, primarily as a symbol of certain values and ideals. A number of Buddhist thinkers explicitly refuted the concept of God. Atheism strictly understood as the opposite of theism does not entail a rejection of the afterlife or spiritual and moral teleology of human endeavours, and has to be clearly distinguished from materialism, which is an antithesis of metaphysical idealism and which reduces all phenomena, including consciousness, to matter, and this is clearly not what Buddhism is.

In Buddhism – as a moral and salvific system that offers one a promise of eternal liberation from the mundane and from omnipresent suffering – the idea of ‘divine’ has to be accordingly adjusted, for ‘divine’ cannot refer to God. Special divine action has therefore to be necessarily related to the Buddha himself and to his teaching, i.e. Dharma, or to anything that is an extension of either, i.e. to whatever is related either symbolically (symbolises), sympathetically (possesses a link to) or essentially (participates in the substance of) to the Buddha or Dharma, the latter often being reified and treated as the essence of the Buddha. One cannot therefore accept as a universal principle the claim that miracles can primarily serve in an argument in favour of a form of theism.

3. Classifications

With its historical and regional richness, Buddhism never evinced a unanimous attitude to miracles or worked out homogenous rationalisation of the miraculous, the idea of which developed and transformed over centuries and played a range of roles in different regional, historical, social and cultural contexts.

It is sometimes assumed that one cannot speak of miracles in Buddhism in the true sense inasmuch as what we have in Buddhism does not fulfil basic criteria of a definition of miracle, miraculous or extraordinary powers possessed by the Buddha were not unique to him, and supernatural powers were not considered in Buddhism to violate natural laws.

The arguments rest on a projection of early Buddhism and the Buddha’s original teaching as primarily a rational, philosophical enterprise, which hardly involved religious cult, and on a conviction that any textual layers in Buddhist canons that present the Buddha performing miracles would belong to a later, ‘popular’ or ‘corrupt’ tradition. An analysis of earliest sources depicting the intellectual milieu in which Buddhism came into existence and developed, including Jainism and Ajivikism, reveals that the existence of supernatural powers and miracles was taken for granted and all spiritual teachers who were founders of these religions were expected to work miracles by early generations of their followers. Religious cult and worship, e.g. the worship of the Buddha’s relics, was an integral part of the history of Buddhism from its very outset. The Buddha is said to establish

the religious cult around the *stūpa* and to believe in supernormal powers and miracles himself, and miracles are mentioned in early literature to mark all important events in the Buddha's life.

What allows to practically distinguish between 'genuine' miracles performed by the Buddha and 'sham' miracles, considered merely a display of magical powers, seems to be idea of the purpose. Only the Buddha and other legitimate agents were capable of performing miracles, whereas everyone else could exercise their yogic or supernormal powers.

Present-day rejection of miracle claims in Buddhism because supposedly supernatural events were not thought to be in accordance with the laws of nature rests on the modern understanding of the miracle which goes back to David Hume's definition of a miracle as "a violation of the laws of nature". That being the case, one would be required to paradoxically assume that Buddhism in the pre-scientific era had a clear concept of the laws of nature which themselves are the product of the modern era, because only in such a context a definition of miracle as a violation of the laws of nature by a supernatural agent could be meaningful. Three possible Buddhist concepts are sometimes suggested to serve as substitutes for natural laws, viz. (1) the so-called law of *karman*, i.e. the idea of moral retribution, (2) dependent origination (*pratītya-samutpāda*), which is to explain the sources of suffering in the world, and (3) the nature of things (*dharmatā*), i.e. the ultimate essence underlying the phenomenal world. First two, however, are primarily of moral dimension, and do not concern relations between material things as laws of nature do, and the third one is an ontological concept which points to certain transcendent underlying reality and does not refer to laws. Thus, it appears that the idea of violability of natural laws is practically irrelevant to the concept of miracles in Buddhism.

A distinction partly relevant to the problem of the relation of natural laws and miracles may be that between the mundane, ordinary (S.: *laukika*; P.: *lokika* / *lokiya*) and the transmundane, transcendent (S.: *lokottara*; P.: *lokuttara*). The former pertains to 'this' world, whereas the latter refers to the supramundane, otherworldly and the transcendent nature of the Buddha as such, excepting his corporeal dimension, with all his supernatural aspects and activities. These are the two dimensions which represent two separate ontological orders and are governed by two separate categories of 'rules', those that organise the ordinary lives in the material world (*loka*), such as causality, lapse of time, act–result moral correlation (*karman*), suffering, impermanence etc., and those beyond the grasp of the humans which transcend the ordinary course of events, a level at which awakened (enlightened) practitioners see the reality as it ultimately is. The two aspects of reality are reflected in two kinds of awareness: ordinary (*laukika*) and transcendent (*lokottara*). The rules of the ordinary level possess only relative validity, or even certain irreality, from the perspective of the higher level. It may be suggested that miracles interfere with the lower order of natural laws and ordinary conventions which apply to the

world the way it is customarily experienced and conceptualized by ordinary people, whereas they *are* in fact expected to be in harmony with the ultimate order of things in the transcendent level, being a ‘divine ordinance’ (*daivo vidhih*).

The Buddhists did generally make a distinction between true miracles and magic, usually known under the name ‘illusion’ (*māyā*) with which magicians, the fraudulent, unrestrained and of miscarried views trick people and are “born to devour the world.” A display of magical powers, it seems, may resemble a true manifestation of a miracle to an inexperienced and uninitiated onlooker, particularly when it comes to the display of supernatural powers, the difference remains however that magic is deceitful, misleads people and is a realisation of selfish goals of an unrestrained magician who lacks standard moral qualifications. Magic is believed to be merely a result of asceticism and special knowledge, which can also be encapsulated in magic spells and formulas, whereas true miracles have to follow the acquisition of highest possible moral qualifications and selflessness and are to be performed solely for the benefit of other beings.

Categorisation of types of special divine action is important for a definition of the miracle in Buddhism, and Buddhist thinkers provide two such main classifications.

3.1. Classification I

The following is probably the earliest typology of miracles (around 3rd century BCE?), attested in various sources:

(1) ‘the miracle of supernatural powers’ (P.: *iddhi-pāṭihāriya*; S.: *ṛddhi-prāṭihārya*), i.e. miraculous display of supernatural powers which is beyond the powers of ordinary humans, such as obtaining multiple forms, becoming invisible, passing through solid objects, sinking in a solid ground, walking on water, levitation, touching distant objects, travelling in one’s body to different worlds;

(2) ‘the miracle of telepathy’ (P.: *ādesanā-pāṭihāriya*; S.: *ādeśanā-prāṭihārya*), or “reading the minds, hearts and thoughts of other beings”;

(3) ‘the miracle of instruction’ (P.: *anusāsani-pāṭihāriya* / *anusāsani-pāṭihāriya*; S.: *anusāsana-prāṭihārya* / *ānusāsani-prāṭihārya*) or admonition, i.e. miraculous display of the ability to convey the salvific message, especially to impart the teaching of Dharma, or moral law.

This most popular classification comprises paranormal abilities which were a stock sample of supernatural powers widely believed in South Asia to be possessed by anyone who assiduously practised asceticism or meditation and reached adequate level of proficiency. What makes such yogic accomplishments as supernatural powers or telepathy miraculous in Buddhism is not simply the fact that one has mastered them but essentially the purpose they serve, which is exclusively religious and selfless, and is an expression of the salvific doctrine of the Buddha. Categories one and two

above should therefore be treated as auxiliaries to category three, which is the one which exclusively serves the attainment of the only true good, i.e. liberation.

3.2. Classification II

An alternative classification (1st–2nd century CE?) highlights the importance of the Buddha’s teaching as a directive to moral life on the path to liberation, which is the paramount criterion to distinguish miracles from magic:

- (1) ‘the miracle of supernatural powers’ (S.: *ṛddhi-prātihārya*),
- (2) ‘the miracle of instruction’ (S.: *anūsāsanī-prātihārya*),
- (3) ‘the miracle of the teaching Dharma’ (*dharma-deśanā-prātihārya*).

In this classification, which is an elaboration of Classification I, telepathy is included in a general category of supernatural powers (*ṛddhi*), and this neatly corresponds to the scheme of classical Yoga (PYS), whereas the miracle of instruction of Classification I is expanded through the addition of the miracle of teaching Dharma.

4. Purpose

Religiously or salvifically motivated purpose is the defining characteristic which distinguishes miracles from a mere display of mental powers or magic. In the first place, however, one should distinguish two levels of purpose of special divine action in Buddhism:

(A) doxastic purpose, i.e. dogmatically defined religious purpose from the believers’ perspective, which is the purpose which insiders’ beliefs expect to be achieved through the performance of genuine miracles in accordance with the Buddhist religious doctrine, irrespective of the actual efficacy of such feats;

(B) meta-purpose, i.e. the actual role played by a body of Buddhist *beliefs* in miracles analysed from a historical, cultural, anthropological, political or social perspective in the context of the Buddhist community, irrespective of individual, psychological or doctrinal needs of followers to entertain such beliefs.

In Buddhist accounts of miraculous events, which all appertain to the doxastic scheme, whenever their purpose is mentioned it is of strictly religious significance and the motivation of the miracle-performing agent is that it should fundamentally contribute to a redemptive design. This can involve a few different, albeit closely related objectives. A traditional canonical explanation of the meaning of the term ‘miracle’ is that it is the instrument that *removes* sensual desires, malevolence, apathy and torpor, discomposure, perplexity, ignorance, discontent, hindrances to spiritual development and all inner impurities. Miracles thus are expected to help

(1) remove all inner obstacles on the path to inner purity and final liberation (*nirvāṇa*).

A Buddhist master Vasubandhu highlights two other important aspects of miracles which are the means of instruction or transformation, and thus they

(2) educate and discipline those who are already devotees open to the moral teaching of the Buddha, and

(3) amaze and persuade, viz. convert, those who are either inimically disposed towards it or completely disinterested.

Other Buddhist texts emphasise a range of additional particularized goals miracles serve by:

(4) engendering trust and faith, which bring tranquillity and purity of mind;

(5) helping the Buddha, Bodhisattvas and other agents “set in motion the noble wheel of Moral Law”, i.e. initiating and sustaining the teaching of Dharma in the world;

(6) directly leading to the conversion of people to Buddhism;

(7) providing religious and dogmatic justification for people to abandon their lay householders’ lives for the sake of the monastic career and reassurance about such a step;

(8) establishing the superiority of the Buddha’s teaching over other religions and systems of belief;

(9) assisting Buddha(s), Bodhisattvas etc. in educating and disciplining living beings and showing them the right way of behaviour by inspiring everyone to follow the proper code of conduct (*vinaya*), viz. to lead a righteous life which should be an expression of and in accordance with Moral Law (Dharma);

(10) demonstrating the purposefulness of the Buddha’s teaching and substantiating its efficacy, which we can call a foundationalist purpose, for miracles attest to the veracity of the Buddha’s teaching;

(11) initiating religious worship (e.g. of the Buddha), justifying it and sanctifying a place of worship which commemorates previous miraculous events;

(12) leading to the recollection of past lives in the case of other people, and the remembrance of one’s previous births with their ensuing karmic results is treated as an important instrument of teaching;

(13) providing a strong religious incentive in the form of spiritual promise that if one pursues the Buddhist path, there follows social high status, merit, receptivity to religious instruction and fame;

(14) being the means with the help of which the Buddha makes the end to the suffering of living beings (*duḥkha*), i.e. living beings are prompted by miracles and thereby encouraged to follow the Buddha’s teaching and tread the salvific path at the end of which there is a cessation of suffering.

In addition, in narrative descriptions, miracles are sometimes assigned the role of signs that manifest cardinal points important to liberation: “A miracle is a manifestation of six points in the world: the Buddha (Tathāgata), Moral Law (Dharma) and monastic conduct (Vinaya) promulgated by the Buddha, birth in the human form, rebirth in the realm of the Āryas, unimpaired sense organs, rejoicing in auspicious moral law (Dharma).”

It is expressly stated that no ascetic practice provides one with the ability to perform certain miracles or wondrous feats which are associated with the Buddha, and only the ones who are on the Buddhist path become true Brahmins, true ascetics, true monks.

It transpires from all the above elementary goals that what constitutes one of defining features of miracles is that they all are auxiliaries to the didactic purpose. The doxastic purpose is thus primarily of didactic and rectifying nature, inasmuch as most above-mentioned varieties can be reduced to being an extension of it, because in virtue of it they preserve their own meaningfulness.

With respect to the meta-purpose, which does not historically find any explicit reflection in Buddhist thought, miracles express the relevance of the miracle discourse to social or political (power-structure) dimension they actually serve(d). Their prime role is to provide grounds that lead to or strengthen social cohesion of the religious community. In actual history, which by no means constitutes the imagined history narrated in the religious myth, what exists in place of miracles is a symbolic re-enacting of the miracles believed to have been performed by the Buddha, Bodhisattvas or other agents, through religious rituals and observances, and meditation on such miracles, e.g. by way of listening to the elevating stories or contemplating religious art in form of paintings, images, sculpture etc. Public or semi-public recitation of religious texts and narration of miracles, participation in religious festivals which commemorate miraculous events or agents, contemplation of engraved panels depicting miraculous motifs etc. leads to the integrity of the Buddhist *saṅgha*, or community, but also serves the purpose of enacting social roles to its individual members who are expected to emulate the conduct of the Buddha’s disciples, believed to be direct witnesses of his miracles etc.

5. Terms, definition and nature

A number of terms have been used to denote miracles, miraculous phenomena or wondrous acts. The most frequent is ‘seizure’ (S.: *prātihārya*; P.: *pāṭihāriya* / *pāṭihīra*), sometimes also translated as ‘conversion,’ ‘supernatural power’ (S.: *ṛddhi*; P.: *iddhi*), ‘supernatural accomplishment’ (S.: *siddhi*), ‘something extraordinary’ (S.: *adbhuta*; P.:

abbhuta), ‘something extraordinary and marvellous’ (S.: *āścaryâdbhuta*; P.: *acchariyabbhuta*), ‘magical transformation’ (S.: *vikurvaṇa*), ‘extraordinary thing’ or ‘spectacle’ (*kutūhala*), ‘marvel’ (*āścarya*), ‘divine ordinance’ (*daivo vidhiḥ*), which can indeed be translated as ‘special divine action’.

Despite the absence of any definition of the miracle in Buddhist literature, a conviction has persisted in Buddhism throughout the centuries that miracles exist and have a particular nature which distinguish them from other unusual phenomena or wondrous exploits, even though there has been a number of perspectives on what miracles consist in. Generally, however, the nature of miracles, especially the nature of miracle of supernatural powers, has been understood to be superhuman, and they exceed anything an ordinary person can accomplish.

There are some points that allow one to propose a ‘cumulative’ definition which encapsulates such intuitions expressed by a range of Buddhist thinkers, even though there are not always absolutely compatible with each other. Thus, a miracle is any supernatural event (1) that is superhuman in the sense of being beyond the normal powers of ordinary, untrained humans under standard mundane circumstances, (2) that violates the ordinary regular course of nature as well as, and only in this particular sense, the natural laws expected to govern the actions and dealings of ordinary human beings, (3) that does not necessarily violate the *ultimate* laws of the universe, (4) that serves as either an indirect (in the case of supernatural powers, mind-reading, instruction and admonition) or direct (in the case of the teaching of Dharma) instrument of spiritual edification which leads to liberation, (5) that is carried out for selfless causes alone, i.e. exclusively for the benefit of the onlookers-recipients, and (6) that is performed by legitimate agents, such as the Buddha(s) etc.

The criteria which allow one to distinguish a genuine miracle from a sham wondrous performance are teleological and praxeological. In terms of teleology, miracles are thus necessarily instruments of religious instruction and they are oriented to the purpose of the religious salvation of all living beings capable of being liberated. Further, in terms of praxeology, miracles are an expression of a deeper normative knowledge about which events and acts, especially miraculous acts, will effect a desired change in the actions of humans beings and other living beings, that will effectively translate into a moral course of actions undertaken by them with the transcendent objective set by the Buddha(s) and other legitimate agents.

In addition, it is suggested that what may distinguish genuine miracles from ordinary wonders is the upright attitude and adequate moral qualifications of the agent. Moral purity, characterised by the absence of defilements and attachment, may serve to draw a clear line of distinction between true miracles performed for the sake of the suffering living beings, guided by the motivation of showing them the right path, and mere wonders accomplished out of selfish attachment and egoistic desires. The Buddha is said to teach Dharma to the living beings and to lead them to liberation

through various skilful means, such as supernatural powers, instruction, and miracles. He is portrayed to use his skill in means in the manner which exactly corresponds to standard lists of miracles, such as becoming invisible etc., and in this way miracles become an expression of his perfection in liberatory, redemptive techniques.

In logical terms, the concept of miracle in Buddhism involves a kind of circularity: whatever extraordinary, wondrous and supernatural exploit is performed by the Buddha and other legitimate agents is miracle, and miracle is not what is made to occur by other agents, e.g. magicians, heterodox ascetics etc., irrespective of how much miraculous such acts appear to be.

6. Agents

Miracles are believed to be primarily performed by Buddha Śākyamuni, the protagonist of most stories in Buddhist literature, or beings in essence akin to him, i.e. by other Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, who in fact function as a kind of mythological extension of the Buddha. In addition, also other agents, either animate beings or inanimate objects that are symbolically the substrata of the divine character and potency of the Buddha and Dharma, can similarly be invested with supernatural powers that may conjure miracles. Such miracle-workers can be called 'legitimate agents'.

Some texts seem to indirectly provide partial catalogues of agents capable of performing true miracles, not mere wonders, and thereby teaching Dharma. These include Buddha Śākyamuni and other Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, awakened ('enlightened') persons, distinguished disciples of the Buddha, certain divine beings (gods), subterranean demigods, thaumaturges possessed of great supernatural powers, kings, etc. All these agents act with the objective of educating and disciplining people and inducing in them admiration of and awe for the power and truth of Dharma, and thus participate in the powers invested with Dharma.

In addition, there are other 'agents' that are considered to work miracles, namely inanimate objects such as relics of the Buddha, but also the relics of saints who have attained *nirvāṇa*, or burial mounds containing such relics (*stūpas*) etc. Also certain material objects associated with the Buddha, sacred paintings and images, amulets, seals and other objects with mystical incantations inscribed on them, holy manuscripts etc. are believed to work miracles, cure diseases etc. Their miracle working powers are often believed to be due to the Buddha's spiritual authority and power over relics and the *stūpas* enshrining them.

Some traditions, however, such as Theravāda, would treat the capability of performing certain miracles as a distinctive characteristic of the Buddhas not shared with any other agents.

7. Justification

Attempts to rationalise and consistently explain the phenomenon of miracles within Buddhism were extremely rare and one of them is found in Vasubandhu's *Treasury of Higher Doctrine (Abhidharma-kośa)*. In the first step, six kinds of supranatural knowledge (S.: *abhijñā*; P.: *abhiññā*) are enumerated, out of which the first five can be obtained by ordinary people through religious effort and passionlessness, albeit at a limited form or capacity, whereas the last one – i.e. unmediated realisation of the knowledge with respect to the destruction of the four defilements (S.: *āsrava*; P.: *āsava*) – is accessible only to the most advanced Buddhist practitioners who have destroyed the defilements. The second step links three of these supranatural knowledges, as fundamental epistemic faculties of salvific significance, to three kinds of miracles. The first and third supranatural knowledges (with respect to supernatural powers and with respect to the contents of another person's mind) are preconditions for the miracle of supernatural powers and of telepathy respectively. The last one (the immediate personal knowledge of how to effectuate the destruction of defilements) is requisite for the miracle of instruction (Classification I) and to the miracle of the teaching Dharma (Classification II). Thus, the 5+1 kinds of supranatural knowledge build up a hierarchy on the top of which there is the knowledge of the destruction of defilements.

In this way we can observe certain logical, or rationalised sequence: a special kind of knowledge of the true nature of a phenomenon enables one to perform an act (miracle), which is a practical realisation of the ability originating in the knowledge, and this in turn leads to the desired result (purpose), which is proper guidance of people to their final goal (*nirvāṇa*), through the teaching of Dharma:

supranatural knowledge → miracle → guidance

The model allows one to draw a distinction between true miracles and sham wondrous performances. Only the one who has acquired the highest, sixth knowledge, that of to the destruction of defilements, through his own practice and experience is capable of working true miracles, and accordingly the prerequisite for the miracle-working powers is the destruction of defilements, achieved only at the stage of a Buddha and a Buddhist saint (*arhant*). In this way, the model provides a theoretical background for a proper understanding of the nature of miracles and their definition.

8. Examples

The best known, paradigmatic miraculous feat performed by the Buddha is the great miracle of Śrāvastī (P.: Sāvattihī), an integral part of which is the so-called twin miracle, sometimes translated as duplicate miracle, etc. In the story, Buddha Śākyamuni confronts the so-called six 'heretic' ascetic

teachers, and displays his miraculous powers which are beyond the capacity of any other human beings. In the story, he has a prince's body restored to its previous, intact form, after his limbs were severed at the orders of a king, makes a young Brahmin fly up in the air, sets a pavilion on fire which causes no damage and is extinguished by itself, conjures a wondrous blaze of golden light that fills in the whole world, makes a tree grow from a seed within a blink of an eye, emits streams of golden rays of light from his body, becomes invisible and reappears high in the sky, emanates multi-coloured rays of light from his body, and performs the twin miracle: simultaneously discharges glowing fire from one part of his body, and water from another, interchangeably from different sides. The culmination is the miracle of self-replication, or the Buddha's multiplication through a number of forms, usually known as 'the great miracle of Śrāvastī' *per se*, beyond the capacity of any other human being. The Buddha miraculously creates a plethora of large shining lotuses that grow up in the sky, himself seated in the middle and surrounded by his miraculous replicas, an enormous garland of Buddhas, with the six rival teachers defeated and humiliated.

In a popular miracle of Rājagrha, Devadatta attempts to murder the Buddha by convincing the mahouts to let a man-slayer elephant loose into the road on which the Buddha was about to approach. With a thought of loving kindness, the Buddha tames the elephant in an instant.

An unusual series of miracles are narrated to take place at Urubilvā/Uruvelā (now Bodhgayā) which are meant to convert three ascetic brothers, Kāśyapas, whom the Buddha visits in order to convert them. He is granted permission to stay overnight in a fire-room inhabited by a vicious fire-breathing deadly serpent. After a fire duel, in which both the parties blazed up magical burning heat against each other, the Buddha subdues and tames, and hands the serpent over to the owner. Three subsequent miracles have four kings and divine beings set ablaze like huge fires appear in front of the Buddha to listen to his sermons. Finally, the Buddha reads the minds of the brothers, and thereby demonstrates his spiritual superiority over them. The series of miracles fits well with the standard Classification I of miracles in reflects all the three kinds in a hierarchy.

Some of miracles are said to relate to the so-called *stūpas* commemorating the eight great occasions (places) for miracles, which became important places of Buddhist pilgrimage.

9. Criticism and practice

The attitude to miracles and wonder making was ambivalent and complex, and Buddhist tradition was not uniform with regard to the display of supernatural powers, and even the Buddha is portrayed in a differentiated manner. There are passages of early Buddhist literature where the Buddha denounces the display of miracles and condemns monks who boast to possess supernatural powers, and even when he is portrayed to recognise

limited usefulness of certain magical practices and miraculous powers, he expresses his strong reservations. At the same time, however, he is said to perform miracles himself on a number of other occasions. The monastic rules of the Pali code of conduct (*vinaya*) contain an explicit interdiction of the display of supernatural powers of superhuman nature in front of layfollowers. The attempts to classify miracles and the rejection of a display of miraculous powers and magic has been interpreted as a philosophical and rationalistic perspective in Buddhism vis-à-vis miracles and the supernatural. However, this should be understood in a context and cannot be interpreted as a general condemnation of miracles in Buddhism. Criticism of wonders was primarily concerned with particular situations which may lead to confusion or even scepticism regarding the miraculous powers of the Buddha and his teaching, and the emphasis was on the educational aspects of miracles as instruments to teach Dharma, which was their prime goal. The attitude of Buddhist texts is therefore not always consistent with regard to thaumaturgy and magic.

The historical development of Buddhism, its growing consideration of popular religiosity and religious needs of layfollowers as well as its spread within South Asia and outside saw a gradual growth of the importance of magic, in line with its missionary policies to adapt to local cultural environment, which in turn involved no disavowal of ancestral beliefs, aboriginal cults or even popular superstitions, but rather their integration within the doctrine. In many Buddhist regions, some aspects of magic and wonders have found their permanent place in actual practice. Contemporary attitudes to miracles are even more diverse than ever before in history, and are a result of three main factors: (a) classical, text-based Buddhist interpretations outlined above, (b) non-standard, popular Buddhist religiosity, local cults and traditional beliefs of non-Buddhist origins, and (c) contacts with various modern trends or fashions with respect to the miraculous and the supernatural.

Note: Two sets of the original terms and names are used throughout in the entry: both in Sanskrit (S.) and Pali languages (P.).