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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 mid-5th to mid-4th century BCE, with the missionary activities of its historical founder Siddhārtha Gautama (Pali: Siddhattha Gotama, or ‘the one who has accomplished his goal’) Śākyamuni (Pali: Sakkamuni, or ‘the sage of the Śākya clan’), who eventually came to be known as the Buddha (Sanskrit / Pali; ‘the awakened one’). The Buddha’s dates have been variously fixed, with the dominant opinion in the 20th century assigning his lifetime to a period within the range 566/363–486/483, whereas recent research favours the latter half of the 5th century BCE with ca. 410–390 as the time of his death (Sanskrit: *parinirvāṇa*; Pali: *parinibbāna*).

His 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 (Sanskrit: *nirvāṇa*; Pali; *nibbāna*, or ‘extinguishing / blowing out’), gradually evolved into a range of various sects and schools with views as divergent as realism or idealism, a strong denial of the existence of an individual self, or soul, or its acceptance. That allows one to speak in a sense of ‘a number of Buddhisms’. Buddhism, as a religion, also developed its rich philosophical tradition. As a system of moral values and religious ideas, it can be classified as a non-Brahmanical tradition. At the same time Buddhism was strongly influenced by beliefs and ideas developed within Brahmanical traditions, which first focused on Vedic religion, and then transformed into various forms of what later came to be known as Hinduism. In this sense, Buddhism shared a number of elements with other non-Brahmanical religious and philosophical systems of South Asia such as Jainism and Ajivikism.

Except for extensive legends and myths that surround the birth, life and death of the historical founder of Buddhism, and scattered unreliable information largely contained in Buddhist texts that post-date the Buddha’s death by a few centuries, no solid historical data or archaeological evidence is available that would allow for a reliable historical reconstruction of his biography. The myths surrounding the events in the Buddha’s life are directly relevant to the ideas of miracles, wonders and marvels in Buddhism, inasmuch it is primarily his biography that exemplifies them and informs a paradigm of what miracles are in Buddhism,

whereas instances of miracles performed by others should generally be treated as an extrapolation from this.

Siddhārtha Gautama, the most recent Buddha, is believed to have been born in a succession of several, twenty-four (*Buddha-vamsa*) or (according to later sources) innumerable previous Buddhas ('thousand Buddhas') in the current aeon, one of them being Dīpaṅkara (Pali: Dīpaṅkara, 'The Lamp Bearer'), who is said to have predicted that a young Brahmin student called Megha (or a Brahmin ascetic Sumedha / Sumati) would be reborn in the future as Siddhārtha Gautama, attain the awakening (*bodhi*, the 'enlightenment') and become the Buddha. He would be followed by Maitreya (Pali: Metteyya), the future Buddha, which is the Buddhist counterpart of the Messianistic myth.

The circumstances preceding and accompanying the Buddha's birth, in the way they are narrated, were miraculous. Before queen Māyā ('Miraculous Power'), the wife of king Śuddhodana, conceived Siddhārtha, she saw in a dream a white elephant entering her body from the right side. That was the time when Siddhārtha Gautama descended to earth from the Tuṣita Heaven, into the womb of his mother. As a witness to the miracle, the earth itself trembled. The pregnancy lasted ten lunar months. In a grove near Lumbinī, Māyā gave birth to her son in a miraculous manner. While the earth trembled, surrounded by gods, and fully aware, the future Buddha emerged from queen Māyā's right side to spare her the sufferings of labour, whereupon he 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 that distinguished him from ordinary humans. Wise men at the royal court foretold that a leader of humankind was born to become either a universal monarch (*cakra-vartin*) or a spiritual teacher of all (*buddha*). When Siddhārtha's mother died seven days later, his father decided to groom him for the role of the universal monarch as his heir, and do his utmost to prevent him from embarking on the career of a religious recluse. 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 the royal palace, surrounded by countless riches, pleasures, and entertainment, including innumerable female attendants. At the age of 16, he married princess Yaśodharā of a noble Śākya family, who bore a son Rāhula. Fully shielded from any exposure to sickness, old age, death and other ills of the world, he lived in comfort up to the age of 29, unaware of the world's sufferings and showing no desire to leave the walled pleasurable enclosures of the palace even for a moment. One day, however, unlike any ordinary human who would have done it long before, driven by curiosity, he decided to see the world outside, and the parks adjacent to the palace. The king ordered that all the surrounding areas be cleared from anything reminiscent of afflictions and ills of the world, including common folk. It was only by dint of an intervention by the gods, that, on the road outside, there appeared, on three consecutive outings, a man stricken with old age, a sick man, a dead man carried on a bier: all

symbolising universal suffering in its various aspects, i.e. the quintessence of the first and second noble truths that all is suffering and there are specific causes of it. On the fourth day, Siddhārtha saw (in what is clearly an ahistoric image of a Buddhist monk projected onto the pre-Buddhist age) a wandering recluse in saffron clothes with shaven head; a symbol of victory, setting the goal of overcoming all suffering and rebirth, and an indication of the third and fourth noble truths that there is a cessation of suffering as well as a path to it. Thereupon, the future Buddha abandoned his family life, leaving the palace at Kapilavastu under the cover of the night, mounting his horse Kanthaka, with the bolted city gates miraculously being opened for him by the gods. This scene is known as the Great Renunciation.

For six years, Prince Siddhārtha led a life as a recluse, experimenting with various ascetic paths and practices. From his teachers, Ālāra Kālāma and Udraka, he learnt various meditative techniques but, dissatisfied, he joined a group of five ascetics in whose company he practised severe forms of penance and self-mortification. Emaciated, he realised that mortification is as fruitless an extreme as the excessive pleasures and opulent life in the palace. In contrast the proper course is the middle path (an expression which later became synonymous with Buddhist practice), avoiding the extremes. At the age of 35, six years after he had renounced the luxuries of the palace, on the full moon of May, in solitude, he sat under a *bodhi* tree, or the fig tree of the awakening (*Ficus religiosa*), in a place now known as Bodhgayā and, unguided by any master or supernatural agency, set out to enter the four stages of meditation that would eventually lead him to the attainment of full awakening (*bodhi*), exemplifying the salvific path open to all humankind and a way out of the chronic suffering in the cycle of rebirth (*samsāra*). To prevent this, and to disturb Siddhārtha's meditation, a demon of desire, Māra, attempted to break his meditation in various ways: by threatening him, assailing him with elements etc., by dispatching his enchanting daughters; Desire (Tṛṣṇā), Discontent (Arati), and Passion (Rāga), to tempt him, and finally by claiming the property rights to the spot on the ground on which the prince sat. Summoned by Siddhārtha touching the earth with his open palm (a scene frequently seen in Buddhist iconography), the goddess of earth confirmed his right to remain and meditate on the spot. Māra being conquered, Siddhārtha, engrossed in meditation, gradually recalled his former lives, saw other beings wander in the cycle of death and rebirth in dependence on their previous deeds, and gained full insight into the four truths and understood the principle of universal causality. Having understood that there is nothing permanent and no tangible self, Siddhārtha became fully awakened; the Buddha, with all ignorance and desire dispelled for ever. The moment was accompanied, like all important events in his life, by earthquakes and other wondrous occurrences, with gods descending from heavens.

At the entreaty of the gods, he set off to deliver his first sermon directed to his former five ascetic colleagues, who were in Sārnāth, near Vārāṇasī. That moment when he communicates his teaching to other people, who become his disciples is the formal beginning of Buddhism as a religion, which, by definition, is a social affair, not a mere personal experience. The *Discourse on the Turning of the Wheel*

of *Moral Law*¹ contained the essential elements of Buddhist teaching: The four noble truths (suffering, the causality of suffering, the cessation of suffering, the path leading to the cessation of suffering), the idea of the impermanence of all things as well as the eightfold path to liberation (right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right way of life, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration).

Surrounded by groups of disciples and followers, the Buddha spent the remaining 45 years of his life wandering across north-eastern India and promulgating his teaching, i.e. the moral law, or Dharma, to anyone ready to listen, surviving, in the process, a few attempts at his life. After preaching his last sermon, known as *The Discourse on the Final Extinction*² and instructing his disciples that once the Buddha was gone, his teaching (*dharma*) and the code of monastic conduct (*vinaya*) should be their guidance, and explaining that all conditioned things are transient, he departed, or 'his personal series was finally dissolved'.

2. Special divine action without God

In this entry, 'miracle' is used as largely synonymous with 'special divine action' (SDA). The study of such traditions as Buddhism, Jainism or Ajivikism are of crucial importance for our understanding of the nature and role of religion as such, and in particular of miracles, since their conceptual framework diverges from beliefs typified by Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition. The study of religious traditions other than those dominant in the West or Near East expands the boundaries of our understanding of what religion is, what it entails, and how it is manifested. Buddhism, similarly to Jainism and Ajivikism, provides an example of an atheistic religion, viz. without 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 in the universe, intervener in the world's history, sustainer of the world etc.; a supramundane and superhuman being, ontologically absolutely distinct from everything else in the universe. The fact that the Buddha is said to have eventually been deified in some regions cannot be interpreted in a way that entails that he assumed the role of God, the creator, but merely that he came to be worshipped primarily as a symbol of certain values and ideals. A number of Buddhist thinkers, such as Aśvaghōṣa, Nāgārjuna, Asaṅga, Vasubandhu, Bhāviveka, Candrakīrti, Śāntideva, Śāṅkaranandana, refuted the concept of God.³ Atheism, strictly understood as the opposite of theism, does not entail a rejection of the afterlife or a 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 certainly not what Buddhism is. Consequently, any comprehensive definition of religion has to take into account such atheistic (albeit not

1 Sanskrit: *Dharma-cakra-pravartana-sūtra*; Pali: *Dhamma-cakka-ppavattana-sutta* (SN 56.11 / V: 420–424).

2 Sanskrit: *Mahā-parinirvāṇa-sūtra*; Pali: *Mahā-parinibbāṇa-sutta* (DN 16 / II, 72–168).

3 CHEMPARATHY (1968–1969), KRASSER (2002, II: 15–18), BALCEROWICZ (2003: 440–443).

materialistic) religions, too.⁴ Similarly, a proper understanding of the supernatural and transmundane, miracle, or special divine action, has to incorporate miraculous or wondrous phenomena postulated in Buddhism, or other non-Brahmanical religions of South Asia. For this very reason, what may at first seem not to neatly fit into the conceptual framework of special divine action developed within the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition has to be re-evaluated and integrated into an adequate model applicable to religious phenomena in different cultural backgrounds.

Clearly, to analyse special divine action in Buddhism brings added value in that it requires one to revise the whole concept. Being a moral and salvific system that offers promise of eternal liberation from the mundane and from omnipresent suffering, Buddhism, with some exceptions, remains atheistic through most of its history. That carries serious implications for the understanding of special divine action in Buddhism, where one finds no concept of God. The idea of 'divine' has to be adjusted because, in Buddhism, 'divine' cannot simply 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 is often reified and treated as the essence of the Buddha; the universal and moral order or a refuge providing protection and guidance to devotees. In this sense, we cannot accept as a universal principle the claim that miracles primarily serve in an argument in favour of a form of theism. In the same manner as Buddhism, Jainism and Ajivikism, all of them denying the existence of God, force one to revise the definition and understanding of religion through appeal to God and theism,⁵ they also obligate one to readjust the definition of 'miracle' in such a way that it is meaningful also in the context of atheistic religions.

3. Classifications

It would be mistaken to expect that Buddhism, with its historical and regional richness, had, unlike in the West, one single uniform understanding of the miraculous. The idea of the miraculous developed and was transformed in Buddhism over centuries and played a range of roles in different regional, historical, social and cultural contexts. A lack of unanimous attitude to miracles or homogenous rationalisation of their nature within Buddhism, irrespective of conceptual problems in defining miracles in general, makes any straightforward definition barely imaginable, but not entirely impossible.

It is sometimes assumed⁶ that one cannot speak of miracles, in the true sense, in Buddhism because what we have in Buddhism does not fulfil basic criteria for a

4 BALCEROWICZ (2009).

5 BALCEROWICZ (2009).

6 RHYS DAVIDS (1899–1921, I: 272), LAMOTTE (1944–1980, I: 10, 18), FOUCHER (1949: 270–271), GOMBRICH (2006a: 91–92), ROTMAN (2008: 429, n. 580); for a review of such views, see: FIORDALIS (2008: 1 ff.), FIORDALIS (2010/2011: 381 ff.).

definition of ‘miracle’. Instead, one should speak of supernormal, supernatural or magical powers, or simply magic. Thus, it is alleged that belief in miracles was not essentially included in the tenets of early Buddhism, which had no need of possessing a clear concept of miracle: Miraculous or extraordinary powers possessed by the Buddha were not unique to him. Some of his adversaries, a number of other non-Buddhist ascetics, as well as his disciples, could likewise display them; and finally, such supernatural powers were not considered to violate natural laws. Therefore, the notion of miracle in Buddhism is properly used to refer to extraordinary events.

The first argument rests on a projection onto Buddhism as a whole of early Buddhism, and the Buddha’s original teaching as primarily a rational, philosophical enterprise, which hardly involved a religious cult. In this spirit, some scholars would argue that any textual layers in Buddhist canons that present the Buddha performing miracles would represent a later, ‘popular’ or ‘corrupt’ tradition⁷. This approach restricts Buddhism to the ‘enlightened’ and rationalised dimension of the monastic intelligentsia and clerical illuminati, and ignores its equally vital aspect of popular appeal and belief. An analysis of earliest sources depicting the intellectual milieu in which Buddhism came into existence and developed, along with its rival creeds of 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 possess such extraordinary powers 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 outset. Before his death, the Buddha establishes the religious cult around the *stūpa*⁸ as an integral part of Buddhist practice and, in addition, is portrayed as believing in supernormal powers and miracles himself⁹. Miraculous events and miracles are mentioned in the early Pali canonical literature, as accompanying all important events in the Buddha’s life, and are accepted as punctuating all crucial moments in every Bodhisattva’s career. An example is earthquakes that occur whenever a Bodhisattva descends from heaven, enters the mother’s womb, is born, departs from the house to lead the ascetic life, becomes awakened (i.e. attains ‘enlightenment’); turns on the wheel of moral law (i.e. delivers the first sermon), performs the twin miracle, decides to die, renounces the life forces (i.e. die), and attains the final liberation (*nirvāṇa*).¹⁰

The idea of the purpose of miracles (see below) led to reflection on the difference between ‘genuine’ miracles performed by the Buddha and ‘sham’ miracles, which were considered merely a display of magical powers, which allowed one to

7 See GOMBRICH (2006b:172 ff., esp. 192–194), FIORDALIS (2010/2011: 403–404), SCOTT (2010/2011).

8 DN 16.17 / II: 161, translated in RHYS DAVIDS (1899–1921, II: 182–183) and WALSHE (1987: 274).

9 E.g. DN 16.13–20 / II: 107–109; see GOMBRICH (2006a: 91–92).

10 See the lists in DN 16.13–20 / II: 107–109, and SV ad DN 14.1, II: 412.24–28. Probably an earlier list of just three occasions is preserved in the Mūlasarvāstivāda tradition, MPS_T 22.1–23.8 (II: 233), see FRAUWALLNER (1956: 157–158), CIURTIN (2009).

practically distinguish between the two. Accordingly, only the Buddha and other legitimate agents were capable of performing miracles, whereas all others, including the Buddha's foes, such as Devadatta, the cousin and brother-in-law of the Buddha, and evil ascetics, could exercise their yogic or supernormal powers but these were not to be confused with genuine miracles.

For the third argument, which rests on the modern, most widespread understanding of miracle following David Hume's definition of a miracle as "a violation of the laws of nature",¹¹ one is required to assume that Buddhism had a clear concept of the laws of nature, because it is only in such a context that a definition of 'miracle' as 'a violation of the laws of nature by a supernatural agent' can be meaningful. Clearly, in the pre-scientific era, Buddhism could not have worked out such a concept of the laws of nature. Three possible Buddhist substitutes may theoretically be suggested for the concept of natural law, viz. the so-called law of karman, dependent origination (*pratītya-samutpāda*) and the ultimate essence underlying the phenomenal world (*dharmatā*), or the nature of things. The *law* of karman, i.e. the idea of moral retribution, first, is problematic in itself, because Indian thinkers hardly ever conceptualised the dependence between one's former deeds and future results in terms of natural laws (which is rather a modern interpretation), and secondly, it primarily concerned a moral dimension, and not relations between material things. Similarly, dependent origination is a theory meant to explain the sources of suffering in the world and to demonstrate how existential ignorance (*avidyā*) and desire (*trṣṇā*) lead to rebirth, old age, disease and other varieties of suffering, and again, it is primarily of moral significance. Further, the ultimate essence underlying the phenomenal world in Buddhism is an ontological concept which points to a certain underlying reality, but it is not a law or course of events. Most importantly, none of these candidates for universal natural law is ever mentioned as being violated by the Buddha's miracles. At the same time, both miracles and the exercise of supernormal powers in Buddhism are not treated as interruptions of the order of nature, loosely understood, or disruptions in the natural course of events. Earthquakes, for instance, are in fact expected to occur in order to mark crucial events in the Buddha's or a Bodhisattva's life. Further, what can be mentioned as "a blurring of boundaries" between miracles and "the normal laws of nature", "which goes beyond such thaumaturgy" that violates the natural laws,¹² is actually not a case of miracle but an application of the supernatural powers of certain ascetics in agreement with the natural laws of nature. In this context, it is worthwhile to note what Alfred North WHITEHEAD (1954: 367) once said: "People make the mistake of talking about 'natural laws'. There are no natural laws. There are only temporary habits of nature." It seems, therefore, that the idea of violability of natural laws is practically irrelevant to the concept of miracles in Buddhism.

A useful distinction which sheds some light on how the problem of the relation of natural laws and miracles could have been understood, in some sects of Buddhism,

11 HUME (1748/2007: 114/83). On the problems with the definition, see MCGREW (2015: § 1.2), FIORDALIS (2008: 15 ff.), FIORDALIS (2010/2011: 404 ff.), FIORDALIS (2012: 98 ff.).

12 GOMBRICH (2006a: 92).

is that between the mundane, ordinary (Sanskrit: *laukika*; Pali: *lokika* / *lokiya*) and the transmundane, transcendent (Sanskrit: *lokottara*; Pali: *lokuttara*).¹³ The former category pertains to ‘this’ world, whereas the latter refers both to the supramundane, the otherworldly, and to the transcendent nature of the Buddha as such, putting aside his corporeal dimension, with all his supernatural aspects and activities. These are two levels which represent two separate ontological orders and are governed by two separate categories of ‘rules’, those that organise the ordinary lives of humans and other living beings in the world (*loka*), such as causality, lapse of time, act–result correlation (*karman*), suffering, impermanence etc., and those beyond the grasp of humans, which transcend the ordinary course of events, on a level at which awakened (enlightened) practitioners see reality as it is. The two aspects of reality are reflected in two kinds of awareness: ordinary (*laukika*) and transcendent (*lokottara*), or even supratranscendent (*lokottaratama*). The relative validity, or even certain irreality, of the ordinary rules of the mundane dealings and conventions (the first-order rules) from the perspective of a higher level of transcendent rules (second-order rules) is highlighted especially in Mahāyāna literature, in particular in the Madhyamaka (the Middle Path) school.¹⁴ In other words,

It may therefore be suggested that miracles in Buddhism can be interpreted as interfering with the first 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*)¹⁵. It is at the same time true, that in the tradition of Yoga, with which Buddhist practice is intimately linked, supernatural powers (*ṛddhi*,¹⁶ *siddhi*¹⁷) can hardly be treated as the interfering with laws of nature by an outside agent, e.g. a yogin.¹⁸ When, however, the same powers become incorporated into the miracle scheme in Buddhism, they obtain a new status and, when exercised by the Buddha or other legitimate agents, they can be interpreted as somehow violating natural laws in the afore-mentioned sense.

A revealing comparison is sometimes¹⁹ drawn between the way of differentiating between miracles and wonders in Buddhism, and the mediaeval, Thomistic distinction between ‘marvel’ (*mirabile*), operating within ordinary laws of nature and ensuing from natural causes, albeit hidden to an ordinary man’s mind, and ‘miracle’ (*miraculum*), which has “a cause absolutely hidden from all: and this

13 FIORDALIS (2008: 142–143).

14 This does not mean that the mundane–transmundane distinction overlaps with two truths in Buddhism, esp. Mahāyāna, viz. the empirical reality (*saṃvṛti*) and the ultimate truth (*paramārtha*). Both genuine miracles and ‘simple’ wonders would belong to the level of the empirical reality, losing its significance and essence at the level of the ultimate truth.

15 BC 8.46–48.

16 Lit. ‘increase, perfection’, sometimes translated as ‘success’.

17 Lit. ‘accomplishment, perfect realisation’.

18 See e.g. JACOBSEN (2012b: 4).

19 FIORDALIS (2012: 98–100).

cause is God” who “does [things] outside those causes which we know,”²⁰ The comparison is, however, of limited value.

At the same time, the implicit understanding of miracle in Buddhism as something that interferes with the usual course of nature, tantamount to the ordinary laws of nature, but remains in uniformity with ultimate laws at the transcendent level does seem to resemble Augustine’s understanding of miracle: “Whatever God does contrary to this (i.e. the usual common course of nature – P.B.), we call a prodigy, or a miracle. But against the supreme law of nature, which is beyond the knowledge both of the ungodly and of weak believers, God never acts, any more than He acts against Himself.”²¹

It is occasionally suggested in Buddhist literature,²² that whatever extraordinary phenomenon is effected, such as taking on multiple forms, becoming invisible etc., within mundane awareness, remains a wondrous feat, whereas the same event accomplished with supramundane awareness becomes a miracle. Accordingly, what grants the status of genuine miracle to an event would be the level of awareness, or the state of mind of the agent.

The Buddhists did generally draw a distinction between true miracles and magic, usually under the name ‘illusion’ (*māyā*) with which magicians (Sanskrit: *māyāvin*; Pali: *māyāvī*), the fraudulent (Sanskrit: *sāṭha*; Pali: *saṭha*), the unrestrained (Sanskrit: *asaṃyata*; Pali: *asaññata*) and those of miscarried views (Sanskrit: *vipanna-drṣṭi*; Pali *vipanna-diṭṭhi*), trick people and are “born to devour the world.”²³ In fact, the Buddhists report that the charge of being such a magician is raised against the Buddha by followers of other religious movements, but at the same they subscribe to the general understanding of the actual nature of magic as “an ensnaring deceit with the help of which a magician misleads (i.e. converts) the followers of other spiritual teachers.”²⁴ In this sense, a display of magical powers may bear resemblance to 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 misleads people, and is a realisation of the selfish goals of an unrestrained magician who lacks standard moral qualifications. Magic is believed to be merely a result of asceticism and special knowledge (Sanskrit: *vidyā*; Pali: *vijjā*), which can also be encapsulated in magic spells and formulas (Sanskrit: *vidyā*; Pali: *vijjā*), either pronounced and chanted or written and engraved, whereas true miracles have to be grounded in the acquisition of the highest possible moral qualifications and selflessness, inasmuch as miracles are understood to be performed solely for the benefit of other beings.

Buddhist thinkers endeavoured to categorise special divine action and distinguished some varieties, which is crucial to a definition of ‘miracle’ in

20 *Summa Theologica*, Q. 105, Art. 7; *Quaestiones*, Q. 6: Art. 2.

21 *Contra Faustum* 26.3, quoted in part in Thomas Aquinas’ *Summa Theologica*, Q. 105, Art. 7, see also Thomas Aquinas’ *Quaestiones*, Q. 6: Art. 2.

22 VM 12.1–2, p. 314, translated in ÑĀṆAMOLI (2009: 369); cf. FIORDALIS (2008: 160, n. 59).

23 AKBh 3.9.

24 *Upāli-sutta* (MN I: 375). See also FIORDALIS (2010/11: 389–391).

Buddhism, and helps draw a distinction between miracle and magic, but at the same time it demonstrates that miracles are irrelevant to the question of (a possible violation of) the laws of nature.

3.1. Classification I

Although accounts of various miracles performed by the Buddha or other agents are frequent in Buddhism, both in literature and art, their typology is relatively rare. Despite various approaches to miracles in the rich Buddhist tradition, we are apparently left with just two standard classifications. Probably the earliest typology of miracles (dating perhaps to around 3rd century BCE), and most widespread, is attested to in the Pali canon of the Theravāda tradition,²⁵ and in other early Buddhist traditions,²⁶ but is also found in Mahāyāna literature:²⁷

(1) ‘the miracle of supernatural powers’ (Pali: *iddhi-pāṭihāriya*; Sanskrit: *ṛddhi-prātihārya*)²⁸, i.e. miraculous display of supernatural powers beyond the powers of ordinary humans; usually eight are mentioned: taking on multiple forms, becoming invisible, passing through solid objects, such as walls etc., sinking in (penetrating) solid ground, walking on water, flying (levitation), touching distant objects, such as the Moon or the Sun, travelling in one’s body to different worlds.²⁹ This category of miracle is mentioned most frequently.

(2) ‘the miracle of telepathy’ (Pali: *ādesanā-pāṭihāriya*; Sanskrit: *ādeśanā-prātihārya*), or “reading the minds, hearts and thoughts of other beings”, i.e. mind-reading. Of special note is that the Buddha was considered omniscient, which entailed his unrestricted ability to know everything, including the contents of the minds and hearts of all other people, once he focused his attention;

(3) ‘the miracle of instruction’³⁰ (Pali: *anusāsani-pāṭihāriya* / *anusāsani-pāṭihāriya*³¹; Sanskrit: *anusāsana-prātihārya* / *ānusāsani-prātihārya*³²) in the

25 *Kevaddha-sutta* 4–67 (*Kevaddha-* / *Kevaṭṭa-sutta*; DN 11.4–67 / I: 212–215), *Brāhmaṇa-vagga* 4–7 (AN 3.60.4–7 / I, 170–173), *Pāṭihāriya-kathā* (PM 3.2, II: 227–229).

26 E.g. in the canon of the Sarvāstivāda school, CPS 26.

27 E.g. AdsPPG II: 40 or MVas I, 238.4–5 and III, 321.13–14, English translation: JONES (1949–1956, I: 193, III: 311), AK/AKBh 7.47, AvK (*Prātihāryāvadāna*), pp. 111–115, MST₁ 5.5, p. 22.2 (transl. MST₁, p. 62).

28 “Miracle of supernatural powers which is of superhuman nature” (Pali: *uttari-manussa-dhammā iddhi-pāṭihariyam*), not, as FIORDALIS (2010/2011: 385), puts it as an alternative: “‘miraculous displays of superhuman power’ (*iddhi-pāṭihariya*) or ‘superhuman feats’ (*uttarimanussa-dhamma*)”. For the interchange of final *aṃ* with *ā*, see OBERLIES (2001: 21–22, § 3.5; : 28, § 4.6). It is frequently mentioned in other texts, but without the other two kinds of miracles, e.g. *Pāṭika-suttanta* 4 ff. (DN 14.1.4 ff. / III: 3 ff.), *Citta-samyutta* 15 (SN 41.4.15 / IV, 290 f.). See also: DAv 89–90, CPS 0.3.

29 Sometimes ten kinds are mentioned, e.g. *Idhi-kathā* (PM 3.2, II: 205). For a discussion of the powers, see GETHIN (2001: 81–103).

30 Sometimes (BHSg, p. 392) translated as “miracle of admonition (effecting the destruction of someone’s vices)”.

31 *Saṅgīti-suttanta* 60 (DN 33.1.10 / III: 220), *Brāhmaṇa-vagga* 4 (AN 3.60.4 / I, 170).

32 E.g. AdsPPG II: 40, CPS 26, MST₁ 5.5, p. 22.2 (transl. MST₁, p. 62).

form: “think in this way, do not think in that way, devote your thoughts to this, do not devote your thoughts to that, renounce this, gain that and persevere in it”, i.e. a miraculous display of the ability to convey the salvific message, especially to impart the teaching of Dharma, or moral law.

This popular classification comprises paranormal abilities which were a stock sample of supernatural powers believed, in South Asia, to be possessed by anyone who assiduously practised asceticism or meditation and reached an adequate level of proficiency. Hundreds of stories in Indian narrative literature will attest to this common belief, and the whole third *Chapter on Superhuman Powers (Vibhūti-pāda)* of the famous *Patañjali's Manual on Yoga (Pātañjala-yoga-śāstra)*, consisting of the *Yoga-sūtra* and the commentary *Yoga-bhāṣya*, is devoted to such miraculous powers, which a yogin can achieve through the practice of yoga. The list (PYS 3.18 ff.) includes all supernatural powers in category one, and many more, but also explicitly mentions telepathy (PYS 3.19) which is Buddhist category two. It is clear that no such catalogues of supernatural powers ever mention Buddhist category three: the miracle of instruction in Dharma.

What makes such yogic accomplishments as supernatural powers, or telepathy, miraculous in Buddhism is not simply the fact that one has gone through a training process but, essentially, the purpose they serve, which is exclusively religious and selfless, and is an expression of the salvific doctrine of the Buddha (see below).

In fact, categories one and two of Classification I are auxiliaries to category three, the idea of which is to effectively and successfully convey the Buddha's salvific message to humankind, and success is measured by the criterion of conversion. It is expressly stated³³ that the primary miracle is the third variety, for two main reasons: It does not occur without the destruction of defilements (Sanskrit: *āsrava*; Pali: *āsava*; ‘cankers’, ‘depravities’)³⁴, viz. it is possible only in the case of those who possess the sixth supranatural knowledge (*abhijñā*), i.e. the unmediated realisation of the knowledge with respect to the destruction of defilements (*āsrava*) (see below), and; It alone serves the attainment of the only true good, i.e. liberation, whereas the other two kinds can also be used for other, lower goals.

3.2. Classification II

An alternative, classification (1st–2nd century CE?), primarily in non-Mahāyāna schools, is attested in the *Book of Great Matters (Mahā-vastu)* of the Mahāsāṃghika-Lokottaravāda school:³⁵

- (1) ‘the miracle of supernatural powers’ (Sanskrit: *ṛddhi-prātihārya*),
- (2) ‘the miracle of instruction’ (Sanskrit: *anuśāsani-prātihārya*),

33 AK/AKBh 4.47bd.

34 These constitute the four gravest hindrances on the way to liberation, namely: desires and sensuality (*kāma*), self-preservation instinct (*bhāva*), false views (Sanskrit: *dr̥ṣṭi*; Pali: *diṭṭhi*) and ignorance (Sanskrit: *avidyā*; Pali: *avijjā*).

35 MVas III: 137.

(3) ‘the miracle of the teaching Dharma’ (*dharmadeśanā-prātihārya*).

In this classification, telepathy is apparently included in a general category of supernatural powers (*ṛddhi*), which neatly corresponds to the scheme of classical Yoga (PYŚ), whereas the miracle of instruction of Classification I is expanded with the miracle of teaching Dharma, though the actual difference between the two is not explicitly stated in texts and these two seem to overlap to some extent, or one is redundant. Most probably, in this classification, category two (instruction, or admonition) referred to the moral code of conduct, generally understood as supplementary means of achieving liberation, whereas category three (the teaching Dharma) primarily connoted the teaching of the main doctrinal points of Buddhism, esp. the four noble truths.³⁶

This classification appears to be historically later, being an elaboration of Classification I to make it more consistent. First, mind-reading (*ādeśanā*) is naturally included in a general category of supernatural powers (*ṛddhi*), in agreement with other classifications (e.g. Yoga) that treat telepathy on a par with other mental powers (*ṛddhi*, *siddhi*, *vibhūti*). Second, the Sanskrit (or its Pali equivalent) term *dharmadeśanā* (‘the teaching of Dharma’) is a modification of *ādeśanā* (‘telepathy’) of the earlier classification. This terminological and semantic shift from Classification I to Classification II highlights the importance of the Buddha’s teaching as a directive to moral life on the path to liberation, which is the paramount criterion for distinguishing miracles from magic.

Behind both classifications there is a tacit acceptance that the three categories of miracle build up a kind of hierarchy: In the case of the first, supernatural powers, it is believed that their likeness, i.e. sham or restricted supernatural powers, can also be within reach of trained individuals, adepts of yoga etc., who are not followers of the true path. Those in the second category, either mind-reading or admonition (instruction), can also be exercised, either in a counterfeit manner or to a very limited degree, by some trained ascetics or spiritual teachers, including Buddhist teachers, respectively. However, only the Buddha and other legitimate agents can perform such miracles both to a full degree, and in a genuine manner. Also they are the only subjects endowed with the ability to perform the third kind of miracle, instruction, or the teaching of Dharma. The two categories of genuine miracles lower in the hierarchical structuring consistently serve as instruments for the instruction of Dharma, additional to the direct teaching of it.

It should be borne in mind that not all Buddhist schools classified supernatural powers (*ṛddhi*) among miracles. For instance a Pali canonical text, *Path of Analysis* (*Paṭisambhidā-magga*), differentiates supernatural powers from miracles in its structure.³⁷ Another example of such a tradition is a Mahāyāna text, *On the*

36 “The teaching the Dharma is the conveying of the four noble truths,” AŚat 15, p. 85, DAv 12, p. 166, BBh, p. 150.10.

37 Separate chapters are devoted to each of the two: *Discourse on supernatural powers* (*Idhi-kathā*, PM 3.2, II: 205–214; translated in ÑĀNAMOLI (2009: 377–384)) and *Discourse on miracles* (*Pāṭihāriya-kathā*, PM 3.2, II: 227–229), albeit the latter does incorporate supernatural

Miracle of the application of the Buddha's powers (Buddha-balādhāna-prātihārya Mahā-sūtra), which seems to distinguish actual miracles (*prātihārya*), without clearly defining them, from various supernatural powers (*rddhi*), magical transformations (*vikurvaṇa*; perhaps an ability to assume various forms), various contrivances and the cultivation of wholesome mental states (*samādhi*), such as formulas for remembering the Buddha (*Buddhānusmṛti*), special powers (*bala*), the possessing of divine eye and ear (*divya-cakṣu*) etc.,³⁸ all of which are said to be possessed by Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, but not all exclusively.

4. Purpose

Religious, or salvifically motivated, purpose is the defining characteristic which distinguishes miracle from a mere display of mental powers or magic. 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 (rather than miracles as such) analysed from a historical, cultural, anthropological, political or social perspective in the context of the Buddhist community, irrespective of the individual, psychological or doctrinal needs of followers to entertain such beliefs.

In Buddhist accounts of miraculous events, which all naturally appertain to 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, whereas all other wondrous acts should be classified as an exercise in worldly, albeit extraordinary powers.³⁹ This can involve a few different, albeit closely related objectives. A traditional and earlier canonical explanation (1st–2nd century CE?) of the meaning of the term 'miracle' (Pali: *pāṭihāriya*) is that it is the instrument that removes (*paṭiharati*) sensual desires, malevolence, apathy and torpor, discomposure, perplexity, ignorance, discontent, hindrances to spiritual development and all inner impurities.⁴⁰ In a possibly comprehensive classification of purposes listed in Buddhist texts, miracles are therefore expected to help

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

powers in its classification, which supports the conjecture that that particular part of the whole structure of the work which distinguishes between powers and miracles was older than the classification inserted into one of its chapters (*Pāṭihāriya-kathā*).

38 BBP 1291, 1293, 1294.

39 Cf. a similar distinction drawn by SWINBURNE (1970: 8–9) between miracles of religious significance, advancing a holy divine purpose for the world and other events lacking religious significance which are magical or psychic phenomena.

40 *Pāṭihāriya-kathā* (PM 3.2 / II: 227–229).

This aspect of SDA is highlighted in another etymology found in a Theravāda work *Path of Purification (Visuddhi-magga)*: “The path of Arhant (Buddhist saint) accomplishes the goal, hence it is called a supernatural power; it removes desires, hence it is called a miracle.”⁴¹ That is why the Sanskrit/Pali term (*prātihārya / pāṭihāriya*) for ‘miracle’ is sometimes rendered as ‘metamorphosis’ of, or ‘counter-stroke’ against, lust or desire,⁴² which hinder progress on the spiritual path.

Two most important aspects of SDA are highlighted by a Buddhist Mahāyāna master Vasubandhu (4th/5th century CE), who provides two explanations for the term ‘miracle’ (Sanskrit: *prātihārya*), which are clearly far from philological or etymological accuracy, but which adequately express the Buddhist understanding of the actual nature of special divine action: “First, miracles (*prātihārya: pra-ati-hārya*) are so designated because, at the very outset, they seize (*hārya > haraṇa*, i.e. attract) people of minds that can be morally guided towards the implied goal,⁴³ and such meaning is indicated in the term ‘miracle’ by prefix ‘pre’ (*pra*) in the sense of ‘precursory act’ and by prefix ‘over’ (*ati*) in the sense of ‘overwhelmingly’. Second, they are so called, because through them divine agents impress (*pratiharanti*) the minds of people who are hostile or indifferent to Dharma.”⁴⁴

Being the means of instruction or transformation, miracles are thus meant either (2) to educate (cf. *dharma*) and discipline (cf. *vinaya*) those who are already devotees open to the moral teaching of the Buddha, or (3) to amaze and persuade, viz. convert, those who are either inimically disposed towards Buddhism or completely disinterested.

Thus, miracles, and especially narratives of miracles, are meant to cultivate an affective response in the witness by engendering exhilarant agitation or anxious thrill (*samvega*) in the audience.⁴⁵ This is in line with other textual sources⁴⁶ which emphasise that the Buddha(s) teach(es) Moral Law (*dharma*) to living beings by means of miracles.

(4) The emphasis on trust and faith (Sanskrit: *abhiprasāda / prasāda*, Pali: *abhippasāda / pasāda*), which bring tranquillity and purity of mind (*prasāda*), is frequently mentioned as the affective and epistemic purpose of a display of miraculous powers exercised by the Buddha and other agents in Buddhist literature. For instance, the Pali canon states that a miracle in the form of, say, a display of supernatural powers, i.e. the first category of miracle in both classifications, should be performed so that people develop faith and trust in the

41 VM 12.20, p. 318, translated: ÑāṇAMOLI (2010: 373).

42 ÑāṇAMOLI (2010: 373).

43 Cf. TSaP₁ 3194–5, p. 833.217 = TSaP₂ 3193–4, p. 1008.12.

44 AKBh₁ 7.47, p. 424.11–13 = AKBh₂ p. 114.14–16.

45 SCHEIBLE (2010/2011).

46 E.g. MVas III: 51.11–14, BBP 1289, 1294; MPPŚ 15.9; *Aṣṭa-sāhasrikā-prajñā-pāramitā-sūtra* in CONZE (1958: 221–222)..

doctrine.⁴⁷ In the *Book of Great Matters (Mahā-vastu)*, the three kinds of miracle of Classification I are assigned a plethora of additional or subsidiary roles:

(5) With the help of miracles, the Buddha, Bodhisattvas and other agents “set in motion the noble wheel of Moral Law”,⁴⁸ i.e. they initiate and sustain the teaching of Dharma in the world.

(6) Miracles straightforwardly lead to the conversion of people to Buddhism.⁴⁹ For this reason the Sanskrit/Pali term (*prātihārya / pāṭihāriya*) for ‘miracle’ is occasionally translated into English as ‘conversion.’⁵⁰

(7) Miracles provide religious and dogmatic justification for people to abandon their lay householders’ lives for the monastic career, and reassurance about such a step.⁵¹

(8) Miracles are thought to establish the superiority of the Buddha’s teaching over other religions and systems of belief.⁵² A variant of this goal, found in the encyclopaedic *Compendium on the Reals (Tattva-saṅgraha)*, 8th century) and its commentary belonging to a syncretic Mahāyāna tradition,⁵³ highlights the Buddha’s omniscience who, being all-seeing and knowing the thoughts and deeds of all his disciples (i.e. Buddhists) and other people (i.e. non-Buddhists), reveals his own infinite epistemic faculties to people by telepathy (*ādeśanā-prātihārya*) and other miracles. This feat can be treated as a proof of the Buddha’s pre-eminence over all other spiritual teachers, and *ipso facto* proof of the pre-eminence of Buddhism, because no one except the Buddha can be omniscient, according to the Buddhists.

(9) Through miracles, the Buddha(s), Bodhisattvas etc., educate and discipline (*vinayanti*) living beings, showing them the right way of behaving. This educational role is understood in rather broad terms: to inspire people and other living beings to follow the proper code of conduct (*vinaya*), viz. to lead righteous lives which are an expression of, and in accordance with, the Moral Law (Dharma).⁵⁴

(10) A particular extension of the previous educational purpose is the demonstration of the purposefulness of the Buddha’s teaching and substantiation of its efficacy; for instance, the Buddha is said to conjure up thousands of other Buddhas in order to provide evidence that his teaching leads to a complete extinction of all former deeds (*karman*), both auspicious and inauspicious (*puṇya-*

47 E.g. *Kevaddha-sutta* 11.2 (DN I: 211–212), MPPŚ 1. Cf. FIORDALIS (2012: 99), though the references to AK/AKBh and AvŚ there are inaccurate, neither directly links miracles (*prātihārya*) and faith (*prasāda*).

48 *Ārya-dharma-cakram pravartenti*, see MVas III, 321–323.

49 III: 408–413.

50 E.g. PRUDEN (1988: 1166–1167).

51 MVas III: 408–413. E.g. young Yaśoda is converted by the Buddha and becomes his disciple, and then he in turn performs miracles usually associated with the Buddha.

52 MVas III: 412.

53 TSaP₁ 3194–5, p. 833.216–18 = TSaP₂ 3193–4, p. 1008.11–13.

54 MVas III: 137; cf. BBP 1289, AdsPPG II: 40.

pāpa), and absolute liberation (*parinirvāṇa*).⁵⁵ We can call it a foundationalist purpose, because miracles attest to the veracity of the Buddha's teaching.

(11) Miracles initiate religious worship (e.g. of the Buddha), justify it, and sanctify a place of worship which commemorates previous miraculous events.⁵⁶

(12) The performance of miracles leads to the recollection of past lives in the case of other people, which likewise has an additional didactic dimension: The remembrance of one's previous births, with their ensuing karmic results, is treated as an important instrument of teaching which directly leads to religious worship of the Buddha, as the one who forged a path out of the bonds of karman to liberation.⁵⁷

(13) Being such an instrument of teaching, miracles are said to provide a spiritual promise to the effect that if one follows the Buddhist path, there awaits him or her social high status (*maheśa*), merit (*puṇya*), receptivity to religious instruction (*ādeya-vacana*) and fame (*kīrti*) in the cycle of rebirth as well as immortality thereafter (*amṛta*), and the promise should serve as strong religious incentive to both lay people and the monkhood.⁵⁸

It is expressly stated in the same text⁵⁹ that no ascetic practice provides one with the ability to perform 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. In this sense, the catalogue of superhuman and wondrous acts associated with the Buddha is a proof in itself that these are miracles, because no one else is capable of performing them.

One of the Mahāyāna *Perfection of Wisdom* texts mentions still another function of miracles:

(14) By means of the three kinds of miracles of Classification I, the Buddha puts an end to the suffering of living beings (*duḥkha*),⁶⁰ a promise which should be understood rather metaphorically, 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 cessation of suffering.

In narrative descriptions, miracles are sometimes assigned the role of signs that manifest cardinal points important to liberation: "A miracle (*āścaryādbhuta*) is a manifestation of six points (*sthāna*) 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*)."⁶¹

The purpose of miracles is therefore vital in determining what a miracle actually is. It transpires from all the above elementary goals that what constitutes one of defining features of miracles is that they are auxiliaries to the didactic purpose.

55 *Triśakunīya-jātaka* (MVas I: 266–267); BBP 1291, 1293.

56 MVas I: 267–270.

57 MVas I: 267–270.

58 MVas I: 267–270.

59 MVas III: 408–413.

60 AdsPPG II: 40.

61 AvŚ 80 (II: 55.1–4).

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 and in virtue of it they preserve their own meaningfulness.

With respect to the meta-purpose, which, historically, does not find any explicit expression in Buddhist thought, miracles express the relevance of miracles discourse to social or political (power-structure) dimension they actually serve(d). Their prime role is to provide grounds that lead to, or strengthen, the 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 the form of paintings, images, sculpture etc. Public or semi-public recitation of religious texts and narration of miracles, participation in religious festivals which, in one way or another, commemorate miraculous events or agents, contemplation of engraved panels depicting miraculous motifs lead to the integrity of the Buddhist saṅgha, or community. These also serve the purpose of enacting social roles for the community's individual members who are expected to emulate the conduct of the Buddha's disciples, and are 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' (Sanskrit: *prātihārya*; Pali: *pāṭihāriya* / *pāṭihāra*⁶²), sometimes also translated as 'conversion,'⁶³ 'supernatural power' (Sanskrit: *ṛddhi*; Pali: *iddhi*), 'supernatural accomplishment' (Sanskrit: *siddhi*), 'something extraordinary' (Sanskrit: *adbhuta*; Pali: *abbhuta*),⁶⁴ 'something extraordinary and marvellous' (Sanskrit: *āścaryādbhuta*; Pali: *acchariyabbhuta*),⁶⁵ 'magical transformation' (Sanskrit: *vikurvaṇa*),⁶⁶ 'extraordinary thing' or 'spectacle' (*kuṭūhala*),⁶⁷ 'marvel' (*āścarya*),⁶⁸ 'divine ordinance' (*daivo vidhiḥ*),⁶⁹ which can indeed be translated as 'special divine action'.

Even though we find no single definition of, or even an attempt at defining, the miracle in Buddhist literature, there has been a conviction in Buddhism that miracles exist and have a particular nature which distinguishes them from other unusual phenomena or wondrous exploits. Generally, however, the nature of miracles, especially the nature of the miracle of supernatural powers, has been

62 E.g. in *yamaka-pāṭihāra* ('twin miracle'), PM 2.125.

63 PRUDEN (1988: 1166–1167).

64 BC 1.63.

65 *Acchariyabbhuta-dhamma-sutta* (MN 123, III: 118–124); AvŚ 80 (II: 55.1–4).

66 BBP 1291, 1293, 1294.

67 *Itad mo*, KṣV 262b.7.

68 AvK 13 (*Prātihāryāvadana*).

69 BC 8.46–48.

understood to be superhuman,⁷⁰ and they exceed anything an ordinary person can accomplish. There are some points that allow one to propose a definition which encapsulates such intuitions expressed by a range of Buddhist thinkers, even though these are not always absolutely compatible with each other.

Taking all available information and explanations into consideration, a miracle, broadly understood, 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, to perform, (2) that violates both the ordinary regular course of nature and the natural laws (the first-order rules) expected to govern the actions and dealings of ordinary human beings, (3) that does not necessarily violate the *ultimate* laws of nature (second-order rules), (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 (*nirvāṇa*), (5) that is carried out for selfless causes alone, i.e. exclusively for the benefit of the onlookers-recipient, and (6) that is performed by legitimate agents, such as the Buddha(s) etc.

Accordingly, 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 (*nirvāṇa*) of all living beings capable of being liberated. Further, in terms of praxeology, miracles are an expression of deeper normative knowledge about which events and acts, especially supernatural and wondrous acts, will effect a desired change in the actions of humans beings, or even more broadly: living beings. This 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. These two criteria for ‘miracles’, teleology and praxeology, find expression in the saying that the Buddha teaches well-grounded (*sanidāna*) Dharma to his disciples out of special knowledge (*abhijñā*) by means of miracles (*sapratihārya*).⁷¹

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. The canonical *Discourse on the factors inspiring faith* distinguishes between two kinds of supernatural powers (Pali: *iddhi*; Sanskrit: *ṛddhi*): those which are ignoble (Pali: *no ariya*; Sanskrit: *anārya*), with defilements (Pali: *sāsava*; Sanskrit: *sāśrava*) and with attachment (Pali: *sa-upadhika*; Sanskrit: *sopadhika*), and remain within the reach of ordinary people, and those which are noble (Pali: *ariya*; Sanskrit: *ārya*), free from defilements (Pali: *anāsava*; Sanskrit: *anāśrava*) and are without any attachment (Pali/Sanskrit: *anupadhika*), which are in the possession of the Buddha and other legitimate agents.⁷² Moral purity, characterised by the absence of defilements and attachment, may serve to draw a clear line of

70 DN 11.4–67 / I: 212–215; AN 3.60.4–7 / I, 170–173; PM 3.2, II: 227–229.

71 MVas III: 51.11–14.

72 *Sampasādanīya-sutta* (DN 28.18 / III: 112–113), translated in RHYS DAVIDS (1899–1921, III: 106–107). See also FIORDALIS (2012: 106–106); VM 12, pp. 314–342, translated in ÑĀṆAMOLI (2009: 369–400).

demarcation 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 frequently mentioned as being guided by the idea of ‘the skill in means’ (Sanskrit: *upāya-kauśalya*; Pali: *upāya-kusāla*), i.e. as applying expedients meant to impress, convert and edify people; a notion of special importance in Mahāyāna and later traditions but present in earlier Buddhism as well. It is said that the Buddha teaches Dharma to living beings and leads them to liberation through various skilful means, such as supernatural powers, instruction, and miracles.⁷³ He is portrayed as using his ‘skill in means’ in the manner which exactly corresponds to standard lists of miracles,⁷⁴ such as becoming invisible etc. In this way, miracles become an expression of his perfection in liberatory, redemptive techniques. Sometimes, scholars distinguish two ‘modes’ of ‘skill in means’: the spectacular and the verbal-homiletic,⁷⁵ but this distinction rather corresponds to two modes of performing miracles: The spectacular mode comprises the display of supernatural powers and the exercise of telepathy, whereas the verbal-homiletic mode embraces instruction and the teaching of Dharma.

Logically speaking, 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 miraculous such acts appear to be. This circularity is analogous to what we find in Buddhist apologetics which ground the authority and truth of the Buddha’s teaching on its reliability; the truth of which rests on the Buddha’s teaching (contained in the scripture) itself.⁷⁶ In this way, a definition of ‘miracle’ in Buddhism amounts to a simple tautology, or ‘tautopraxy’ (from ταὐτός / *tautós*, ‘the same’, and πράξις / *prāxis*, “action, practice”): Any wondrous act (‘magic’) which conveys the Buddha’s message is a miracle, otherwise it is mere magic, and whatever extraordinary deed the Buddha does is miracle, not magic.

6. Agents

Miracles are believed to be primarily performed by the 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. Since the Buddha’s teaching assumed the ontological status of essential equivalence with the Buddha and Dharma, 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

73 E.g. BBP 1291, 1294; MPPŚ 17.7, 52.3.2.3.

74 MPPŚ 49.3.4 (*Ākāśa-dhatu-spharāṇa*).

75 HAMLIN (1988: 101); cf. the critique of FIORDALIS (2012: 98).

76 See FRANCO (1999), STEINKELLNER (2003), BALCEROWICZ (2013).

similarly be invested with supernatural powers and may conjure miracles. These can be called ‘legitimate agents’.

Some texts⁷⁷ seem to indirectly provide part catalogues, (which do not present a uniform picture though) of agents capable of performing true miracles, not mere wonders, and thereby teaching Dharma. Such miracle-workers can be called ‘legitimate agents’. These include, beside the Buddha Śākyamuni, other Buddhas born in other times and regions of the world and teaching Dharma, other awakened (‘enlightened’) persons (Sanskrit: *pratyeka-buddha*; Pali: *pacceka-buddha*), Bodhisattvas, distinguished disciples of the Buddha (Sanskrit: *śrāvaka*; Pali: *sāvaka*) such as Maudgalyāyana, certain divine beings (gods) such as Śakra or Brahma, subterranean demigods (*nāga*), thaumaturges possessed of great supernatural powers (*mahārdhika*), kings (*rāja*), etc. All these agents do not act out of their own powers but produce miracles 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 to participate in the powers invested with Dharma.

There are other ‘agents’ that are considered to work miracles, namely inanimate objects such as relics (*śarīra*; lit. ‘the body’; *dhātu*) of the Buddha,⁷⁸ but also the relics of saints who have attained *nirvāṇa* (Sanskrit: *arhant*; Pali: *arahā* / *araham*), *stūpas*, or burial mounds containing such relics.⁷⁹ These are sometimes called ‘miracles at a shrine of one who has attained liberation’ (Pali: *cetiye pāṭihīra*).⁸⁰ Further, certain material objects associated with the Buddha, e.g. a woollen blanket, sacred paintings and images in monasteries and temples that, through their beauty and religious expressiveness, attract people to hear Dharma,⁸¹ amulets, seals and other objects with mystical incantations inscribed on them (*dhāraṇī*),⁸² and even holy manuscripts and special formulas recited to remember the Buddha (*Buddhānusmṛti*) were believed to work miracles, cure diseases etc.⁸³ Material objects such as relics, *stūpas* etc. are treated not only as semi-alive but as fully animate inasmuch as they are invested with various qualities of the Buddha.⁸⁴ Their miracle working powers are therefore believed to be due to the Buddha’s spiritual authority and power (Sanskrit: *adhiṣṭhāna*; Pali: *adhiṭṭhāna*) over relics and the *stūpas* enshrining them. Sometimes also other agents may by extension

77 E.g. BBP 1289.

78 MVaṃ 17.43 ff. and 31.93 ff. Translated in GEIGER (1912: 119 ff. and 216 ff.).

79 BBP 1289; See: STRONG (2004: 150–177, 236–238), STRONG (2007: 345–346); this tradition was widespread in all the Buddhist realm, both in South Asia – see e.g. *The Chronicle of the Thūpa* (*Thūpa-vamṣa*; JAYAWICKRAMA (1971)), reports by Faxian (LI (2002)), Xuanzang (SHINOHARA (2003)) etc. – and outside, e.g. in Southeast Asia, Sogdia, Japan, China etc., see SHIH (1968: 20–31), SKILLING (2005).

80 Mil p. 309, translated in HORNER (1964, II: 142–144).

81 TAMBIAH (1984: 230 ff.), SCHOPEN (2004: 35–36).

82 TAMBIAH (1984: 195 ff.), MCBRIDE (2005).

83 NAKAMURA (1989: 81 and nn. 95–96).

84 STRONG (2004: 4).

possess authority to work miracles at tombs containing the relics of a saint (*arhant*), and these are the saints themselves, deities and pious believers.⁸⁵

Certain traditions, such as Theravāda, would treat the capability of performing certain miracles as a distinctive characteristic of the Buddhas, not shared with any other agents.⁸⁶ A standard catalogue of such miracles of restricted agency includes the twin miracle,⁸⁷ the self-replication in the form of many Buddhas, or occasioning earthquakes as auspicious omens,⁸⁸ giving rise to unusual and unique miraculous circumstances of their births,⁸⁹ etc. a prerogative not shared even by distinguished disciples (*śrāvaka*). Some traditions, e.g. the Vātsīputrīya, explicitly accept that even non-Buddhists can perform certain miracles (or rather wonders) but to a limited degree.⁹⁰ In most other traditions, such as Theravāda, it is implicitly granted that the eight traditional supernatural powers can be possessed by ordinary trained people,⁹¹ while still others, such as the Dharmaguptakas deny that non-Buddhists can attain any miraculous powers.⁹² Other traditions, such as Sarvāstivāda,⁹³ Mūlasarvāstivāda,⁹⁴ Lokottaravāda, Mahīśāsaka, Aśvaghōṣa, Asaṅga, *Ratna-guṇa-saṃcaya*, *Saṃyuktāgama*, *Madhyamāgama*, *Ekottarāgama*, *P'u yao ching* etc.,⁹⁵ maintain, on the other hand, that rare miracles can exclusively be performed both by the Buddha and distinguished disciples (*śrāvaka*),⁹⁶ after the latter receive and fully grasp the teaching from the Buddha.

An extension of the conviction that certain miraculous powers are limited to the Buddhas is the doctrine of the ten powers (*daśa-bala*) possessed by them alone.⁹⁷ These are extraordinary epistemic powers (*jñāna-bala*), or faculties to know perfectly: propriety and impropriety (*sthānāsthāna*), the retribution for previous deeds (*karma-vipāka*), various propensities and inclinations of living beings (*nānādhimukti*), various elements (*nānā-dhātu*), higher and lower faculties (*indriya-parāpara*), knowledge of the paths leading to all destinations in the cycle of rebirth (*sarvatra-gāmanī-pratipat*), adulteration, purification and origination of

85 Mil. p. 309, translated in HORNER (1964, II: 142–144); see also SHARMA (1931), PRUDEN (1988: 1208, n. 277), NAKAMURA (1989: 78 and n. 59).

86 These texts include PM, DhPAK, Mil, see: RADICH (2015: 148–149, n. 393).

87 VM 12.84, p. 331.14, translated in ÑĀṆAMOLI (2009: 387); DhPAK 14.2, III: 213.18, translated in BURLINGAME (1921, III: 40); Jāt 483, IV: 265.12–13.

88 MPPŚ 15.9; cf. also AK / AKBh 7.51c.

89 *Discourse on wonderful and marvellous qualities (Acchariyabbhuta-dhamma-sutta*, MN 123, III: 118–124), translated in ÑĀṆAMOLI (1995: 979–984).

90 Vasumitra's *Samaya-bhedôparacaṇa-cakra* 7.4, see MASUDA (1925: 55).

91 See RHYS DAVIDS (1899–1921, I: 272–273).

92 Vasumitra's *Samaya-bhedôparacaṇa-cakra* 10.4, see MASUDA (1925: 64).

93 DAv 99.24, MSAV, T 1451, k. 26, p. 332a27, quoted in: LAMOTTE (1944–1980, IV: 1767 ff., n. 4); MVas III: 410.5–10.

94 FIORDALIS (2014: 25).

95 SKILLING (1994, II: 315), RADICH (2015: 148–149, n. 393); ANĀLAYO (2007).

96 See LAMOTTE (1944–1980, IV: 1767 ff., n. 4).

97 *Mahā-sīha-nāda-sutta* (MN 12 / I: 68–71), translated in HORNER (1954–1959, I: 91–95); *Mahā-vagga* (AN 21 / V: 32–36), translated in WOODWARD (1932–1936, V: 23–26); **Dīrghāgama* T2, 41b–c; **Saṃyuktāgama* T2, 186c–187a; **Ekottarāgama* T2, 776b–c, 859a; MPPŚ 39; MVy 119–129. See also DAYAL (1932: 20), DUTT (1978: 80–81), DESSEIN (2009).

all kinds of meditation, liberation, concentration and absorption (*sarva-dhyāna-vimokṣa-samādhi-samāpatti-saṃkleśa-vyavadāna-vyutthāna*), recollection of previous existences (*pūrvā-nivāsānusmṛti*), knowledge of death and birth (*cyuty-utpatti*) and destruction of defilements (*āsrava-kṣaya*).

7. Justification

Attempts to rationalise and consistently explain the phenomenon of miracles within Buddhism were extremely rare and one of them, related to the idea of the ten extraordinary epistemic faculties just mentioned, is found in Vasubandhu's *Treasury of Higher Doctrine* (AK, AKBh). The first step in the argument is to enumerate six kinds of supranatural knowledge (Sanskrit: *abhijñā*; Pali: *abhiññā*), i.e. unmediated realisation of the knowledge with respect: 1. to supernatural powers, 2. to divine hearing, 3. to the contents of another person's mind, 4. to the recollection of one's own previous existences, 5. to births and deaths of all beings, 6. to the destruction of the four defilements (Sanskrit: *āsrava*; Pali: *āsava*).⁹⁸ According to Vasubandhu, the first five can be obtained by ordinary people through religious effort and passionlessness, albeit as a limited form or capacity⁹⁹ The last one is accessible only to the most advanced Buddhist practitioners, who have destroyed the defilements. All six were believed to be integral factors in the process of liberation.

The second step is to link three of these supranatural kinds of knowledge, as fundamental epistemic faculties of salvific significance, to three kinds of miracles. The first supranatural knowledge is a precondition for the miracle of supernatural powers. The third is necessary for the miracle of telepathy (Classification I), and thus indirectly for the miracle of instruction or admonition (Classification II), in which to know people's minds is fundamental for the proper choice of didactic and disciplinary means. The last one, the immediate personal knowledge of how to effect the destruction of defilements, is requisite for the miracle of instruction (Classification I), which would correspond to the miracle of the teaching Dharma (Classification II).¹⁰⁰ Thus, the 5+1 kinds of supranatural knowledge build up a hierarchy on the top of which there is knowledge of the destruction of defilements, which directly stems from one's personal experience.

In this way we can observe a certain logical, or rationalised, sequence: A special kind of knowledge (*abhijñā*) 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:

98 AK / AKBh / AKV 4.42. See LA VALLÉE POUSSIN (1931), LINDQUIST (1935), MACDONALD (2009: 135 ff.), CLOUGH (2010/2011).

99 There was a dispute among Buddhist schools whether non-Buddhists could acquire these first five kinds of supranatural knowledge at all. Some schools (Kāśyapīya/Haimavata, Sarvāstivāda, Vātsīputriya) accepted the claim, whereas others (Mahīśāsaka, Dharmaguptaka) disagreed, see LA VALLÉE POUSSIN (1923–31, V: 97, n. 4) = PRUDEN (1988, IV: 1205, n. 237).

100 AK / AKBh / AKV 7.47ab.

supranatural knowledge → miracle → guidance

At the same time, the model allows one to draw a distinction between true miracles and sham wondrous performances. Only one who has acquired the highest, sixth knowledge, that of to the destruction of defilements (*āsrava-kṣayābhijñā*), through his own practice and experience, is capable of working true miracles. Accordingly, the prerequisite for the exercise of 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 and paradigmatic miraculous feat performed by the Buddha is the ‘great miracle’ (*mahā-prātihārya*) of Śrāvastī (Pali: Sāvattihī), most frequently cited and portrayed in Buddhist literature¹⁰¹ and art, including painting and sculpture,¹⁰² with a number of versions extant in Sanskrit, Pali, Tocharian, Chinese, Tibetan, Mongolian and other languages. An integral part of it is the so-called ‘twin miracle’ (Pali: *yamaka-pāṭihīra* / *yamaka-pāṭihāriya*; Sanskrit: *yamaka-prātihārya*), sometimes translated as ‘duplicate miracle’, ‘miracle of the pairs’, ‘double miracle’, ‘miracle of double appearances’ etc. In the story, Buddha Śākyamuni confronts the so-called six ‘heretic’ ascetic teachers,¹⁰³ and displays his miraculous powers which are beyond the capacity of any other human being, including his six prime adversaries, who had claimed to possess supernatural powers equal to his. In the frame story, Prince Kāla, a half-brother of King Prasenajit (Pali: Pasenadi) of Kośāla, has his limbs severed at the orders of the king. The Buddha, through his close disciple Ānanda, has Prince Kāla’s body restored to its previous, intact, form. The Buddha 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 only to reappear high in the sky, up there walking, standing, sitting, and lying down, emanates multi-coloured rays of

101 Numerous versions, e.g. DAV 12 (*Prātihārya-sūtra*), MVas III: 112–125, translated in JONES (1949–1956, III: 109–122); DhPAK III: 204–223, translated in BURLINGAME (1921, III: 38–52); CPS 27; SV I: 57, MPPŚ 3. See LAMOTTE (1944–1980, IV: 1767 ff., n. 4), RHI (1991: chap. II), SKILLING (1994, II: 303–315), ANĀLAYO (2007), STRONG (2007: 349 ff.), FIORDALIS (2008: 99).

102 FOUCHER (1909), FOUCHER (1917: 147–185), BROWN (1984), RHI (1991), SCHLINGLOFF (1991), SCHLINGLOFF (1997–1998), FIORDALIS (2010/2011: 392–393).

103 I.e. Pūraṇa Kāśyapa (Pali: Pūraṇa Kassapa), Maskarin Gośāla (Pali: Makkhali Gosāla), Ajita Keśakambalin (Pali: Ajita Kesakambala), Kakuda Kātyāyana (Pali: Pakudha Kaccāyana), Sañjayin Vailasthaputra (Pali: Sañjaya Baletṭhiputta) and Nirgrantha Jñāṭṭputra (Pali: Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta), i.e. Mahāvīra Vardhamāna, mentioned in, e.g., the *Discourse on the Fruits of Asceticism* (*Sāmañña-phala-sutta*, DN 2).

light from his body. He also performs the twin miracle: simultaneously discharges glowing fire from one part of his body, and water from another, interchangeably from its lower and upper parts in all four quarters of space.

The culmination of the series of Śrāvastī miracles is the miracle of self-replication,¹⁰⁴ or multiplication through a number of forms. This is usually known as ‘the great miracle of Śrāvastī’ *per se*, and is beyond the capacity of any other human being to perform. The Buddha magically 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 (*buddhāvataṃsaka*). His dazzling glow (*prakāśa*), alone, has the power to convert people (*āvarjana*). Unable to perform anything that could match the miracle, the six rival teachers stand defeated and humiliated, whereas every one else’s faith is invigorated. This great miracle, including the twin miracle, is a paradigm case of miracle, that is supposed to demonstrate the pre-eminent power and supremacy of the Buddha and his teaching. By virtue of this, his distinguished disciples are capable of performing a similar display of miraculous feats, whereas none of heretical teachers ever is. The miracle of the self-replication of the Buddha is also narrated to occur at Rājagṛha (Pali: Rājagaha). Sometimes¹⁰⁵ he is portrayed as producing just a single replica of himself. This takes place in Śrāvastī and is a part of ‘great miracle’ narrative. In the Pali canon, the same miracle is usually known as ‘the miracle at the root of the mango tree’ (Pali: *gaṇḍamba / amba-mūle pāṭihīram*)¹⁰⁶. Another variant of the miracle of self-replication takes place on the banks of the Ganges near Vaiśālī (Pali: Vesalī), where the Buddha conjures up thousands other Buddhas under thousands of sunshades.¹⁰⁷

In another miracle of Rājagṛha,¹⁰⁸ the Buddha transforms his corporeal form into the appearance of the god Indra (Śakra). Shining in golden radiance, and descending from heaven to the spot where Brahmin priests were about to make a sacrifice, the Buddha assumes his true form and delivers the teaching of the four noble truths, thereby converting them all, and generating in them true faith (*śraddhā*).

The same location was the site where another miracle occurred. There Devadatta attempted to murder the Buddha by convincing the mahouts to let a savage, man-slaying elephant, Nālāgiri, loose on the road on which the Buddha was about to approach. With a thought of loving kindness, the Buddha in an instant tamed the elephant, which lowered his head and trunk in front of him.¹⁰⁹

104 E.g. AvK 13 (*Prātihāryāvadana*), p. 100–101, SDP 149 ff.; MPPŚ 15.9, AŚat 15, p. 87; PvsPP, p. 4 ff. See LOPEZ (2004: 51–59 “Two Buddhas seated side by side”); FIORDALIS (2008: 165–168); RADICH (2015: 148–149, n. 393).

105 DAv 12 p.103.

106 MVam 30.82 (p. 241), translated in GEIGER (1912: 204); see also FOUCHER (1917: 152–153).

107 *Triśakunīya-jātaka* (MVas I: 263–271).

108 AŚat 15, 83–87.

109 *Saṅgha-bhedakakkhandhaka* (CV / VinP II: 194–195), translated in HORNER (1938–1952, V: 272–274).

Some of these miracles were included in the list of miracles which mark the so-called *stūpas* commemorating the eight great occasions (places) for miracles (*aṣṭa-mahā-sthāna-caitya*),¹¹⁰ and which became important places of pilgrimage. Initially,¹¹¹ four such places are mentioned in the literature. They are related to various events in the Buddha's career: the place where he was born (Lumbinī), became fully awakened (now Bodhgayā; Sanskrit: Urubilvā; Pali: Uruvelā), where he delivered his first sermon (Sārnāth; Sanskrit: Ṛṣipatana; Pali: Isipatana), and passed away and attained *parinirvāṇa*, or final liberation (Sanskrit: Kuśīnagarī; Pali: Kusinārā). All four events are considered miraculous, by definition. These were extended to eight places (*mahā-sthāna*) by the inclusion of Śrāvastī with the twin miracle, Sāṃkāśya (Pali: Saṃkassa) as the place of the Buddha's descent from the Thirty-Third Heaven (Trāyastriṃśa) by a supernatural ladder, Rājagṛha as the place of the taming of the elephant Nālāgiri, and Vaiśālī as the place of the receipt of gift of honey from a monkey which soon after died to be reborn in heaven^{112 113}.

A rather unusual series of miracles are narrated as taking place at Urubilvā/Uruvelā (now Bodhgayā). These are meant to convert three ascetic brothers, Kāśyapas, leaders of a few hundred recluses, whom the Buddha visits in order to convert them. All three claim to possess unlimited supernatural powers.¹¹⁴ The miracles begin when the Buddha is granted permission by the ascetics to stay overnight in a fire-room, inhabited by a vicious fire-breathing deadly serpent. After a fire duel with the serpent, in which both the parties blazed up magical burning heat against each other, the Buddha subdued and tamed the serpent with the fire element (*tejo-dhātu*), causing no harm to it, and handed it over, peacefully coiled in his alms bowl, to the owner, with the words: "this is your serpent, his fire subdued with my fire". The same event was repeated in the hermitage of another Kāśyapa brother. This fire duel, (fire duel being quite an ancient motif), is reminiscent of a duel with the use of fiery energy (*tejo-leśyā*) between Maskarin Gośāla and Mahāvīra Vardhamāna, the teachers of Ajivikism and Jainism.¹¹⁵ This attests to the fact that a belief in such supernatural fiery powers was popular in South Asia in 6th–3rd centuries BCE and earlier.

Three subsequent miracles have four kings (or guardians of the sky), the god Śakra (Indra), and the god Brahmā, are set ablaze like huge fires, and appear in front of the Buddha to listen to his sermons at night. In the fifth wonder, the Buddha reads the minds of the Kāśyapa ascetic brothers, and thereby demonstrates his spiritual superiority over them.

110 SNODGRASS (1985: 357, n. 37).

111 *Mahā-parinibbāna-sutta* (DN 16.5.8 / II: 140–141), translated in RHYS DAVIDS (1899–1921, II: 153–154).

112 BEAL (1884, II: 68), BROWN (2009).

113 See BAGCHI (1941), NAKAMURA (1980), STRONG (2004: 4–6), HUBER (2008: 22 ff.). On the eight scenes depicted in art, see: LEOSKO (2003: 69–73).

114 MV 1.15–21 / I: 24–34, translated in: HORNER (1938–1952, IV: 32–46); CPS 24–26, translated in: KLOPPENBORG (1973: 50–74); MVas III: 424–435, translated in JONES (1949–1956, III: 425–435).

115 BALCEROWICZ (2016b: 28–34).

The series of miracles fits well with the standard Classification I of miracles, the first four being the miraculous displays of supernatural powers (*ṛddhi-prātihārya*), the fifth representing a case of the miracle of telepathy (*ādeśanā-prātihārya*), whereas the pre-eminent miracle, the miracle of instruction (*anuśāsana-prātihārya*), is the culmination of the whole story when all the ascetic brothers and their companions are converted and hear *The Sermon on things set ablaze* (Pali: *āditta-pariyāya*)¹¹⁶ In this, the Buddha explains that everything is burning with the fire of passion (*rāga*), hatred (*dveṣa*) and confusion (*moha*). A number of other miracles performed by the Buddha concern fire as such.¹¹⁷

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 of possessing supernatural powers.¹¹⁸ Even when he is portrayed as recognising the limited usefulness of certain magical practices and miraculous powers, he expresses his strong reservations.¹¹⁹ At the same time, however, he is said to perform miracles himself on a number of other occasions.¹²⁰ The monastic rules of the Pali code of conduct (*vinaya*) contain an explicit interdiction of the displaying of supernatural powers of superhuman nature in front of lay followers.¹²¹ The occasion for the prohibition is a display of miraculous powers by a Buddhist saint Piṇḍola Bhāradvāja, who uses them to fly up in the air, in order to retrieve a precious sandalwood bowl. This had been suspended on long bamboo poles above the ground, by a layperson, to test the magical abilities of various holy men who had claimed to possess supernatural powers.¹²² Piṇḍola Bhāradvāja is subsequently reprimanded by the Buddha for this performance.

In another Pali scripture,¹²³ the Buddha, requested by an affluent layman, refuses to ask monks to perform miracles in the form of supernatural powers (*iddhi/ṛddhi*) were to strengthen people's faith and trust in the doctrine. As a justification, he enumerates three categories of miracles (Classification I). He explains that, in such

116 MV 1.21 / I: 34–35, translated in: HORNER (1938–1952, IV: 45–46); CPS 26, translated in: KLOPPENBORG (1973: 72–74).

¹¹⁷ See ANĀLAYO (2015).

118 E.g., DN I: 213–214, translated in RHYS DAVIDS (1899–1921, I: 277–279); CV 5.8 / VinP II: 110–112, translated in HORNER (1938–1952, V: 149–152); *Sutta-vibhaṅga* 4.1.3–4.2 (VinP, III: 90–91), translated in HORNER (1938–1952, I: 157–159). Cf. GETHIN (2001: 97–103), FIORDALIS (2010/11: 384–390).

119 SHARMA (1931), WALDSCHMIDT (1959: 1–25), NAKAMURA (1989: 78 and n. 60).

120 MV 1.15–20 / I, 23–34; translated in HORNER (1938–1952, IV: 32–45); MN 49 / I, 326–331, translated in HORNER (1954–1959, I: 388–395). On the relation between magic, miracles and wonders, see GÓMEZ (2010/2011).

121 CV 5.8.2, p. 112; see also DhPAK III: 203, translated in BURLINGAME (1921, III: 38).

122 CV 5.8.2, p. 112; see also DhPAK III: 201–203, translated in BURLINGAME (1921, III: 36–38).

123 *Kevaddha-sutta* (DN 11 / I: 211–215).

a display of miraculous powers and telepathy in front of the lay community, it might be difficult to distinguish true miracles (genuine supernatural powers and telepathy) performed by a saint, with a true spiritual capacity, from magic wrought by a juggler or a wizard using charms and spells: “Perceiving this danger in the display of supernatural powers and of telepathy, I feel uneasy about, I eschew, I reject such a display of supernatural powers and of telepathy.”¹²⁴ Both the attempt to classify miracles and the above rejection of a display of miraculous powers and magic have been interpreted as a philosophical and rationalistic perspective in Buddhism vis-à-vis miracles and the supernatural.¹²⁵

However, this should be understood in context¹²⁶ and cannot be interpreted as a general condemnation of miracles, because we do not find any similar formula condemning the third kind, the miracle of instruction. The Buddha, in this and similar texts, accepts that other ascetics, such as adepts of yoga etc., are also capable of exercising supernatural powers and telepathy which, for a sceptical bystander or unqualified believer, might be indistinguishable from true miracles. It appears therefore that Buddhist criticism of wonders was primarily concerned with such particular situations which might lead to confusion or even scepticism regarding the miraculous powers of the Buddha and his teaching. The emphasis was on the educational aspects of miracles; as instruments to teach Dharma, which was their prime goal. Such activities as palmistry, divination, augury, oneiromancy, physiognomy, magic, use of magic spells, exorcism, layout of dwellings, etc., were considered vulgar arts (Pali: *tiracchāna-vijjā*; Sanskrit: *tiraścīna-vidyā*) which a devout person should not practise,¹²⁷ for these serve practical purposes and can easily be misused by false teachers and tricksters to deceive people or are a wrong means of livelihood. Nevertheless, the attitude of Buddhist texts is not always consistent with regard to thaumaturgy, and indeed some sources confuse miracles with magic.¹²⁸

An opinion is sometimes voiced that the Sarvāstivāda-Vaibhāṣika tradition, represented by Vasubandhu, was consistently opposed to any use of magic, including magical formulas (*mantra*).¹²⁹ The stance of that school, and even of the same Vasubandhu, was not quite so unambiguous, for we find him claim that, on the one hand, the healing powers of medical herbs are independent of any magical incantations recited above them,¹³⁰ but, at the same time, he expresses a belief that supernatural powers (*ṛddhi*) can be produced through magical formulas (*mantra*) or special herbal concoctions.¹³¹

124 *Kevaddha-sutta*, 5 7 (DN I: 213.21–23, 214.14–16).

125 RHYS DAVIDS (1899–1921, I: 272–273), GÓMEZ (1977: 221–222).

126 See GRANOFF (1996), GETHIN (2001: 97–103), FIORDALIS (2010/2011: 385 ff.).

127 *Brahma-jāla-sutta* 21 (DN 1.1.21 / I: 9–12), translated in RHYS DAVIDS (1899–1921, I: 16–19).

128 E.g. *Mahā-vagga* (MV 1.15 ff., pp. 24 ff.), where the Buddha has his aides to conjure up miracles etc.

129 LAMOTTE (1944–1980, IV: 1862 = 2001, IV: 1530).

130 AKBh 9, p. 475.10–11, translated in PRUDEN (1988, IV: 1347); AKV 9.20, p. 716.15–17.

131 AK/AKBh 7.53cd, p. 429.1–3, translated in PRUDEN (1988, IV: 1176).

The historical development of Buddhism, its growing consideration of popular religiosity and religious needs of lay followers, as well as its spread within South Asia and outside, saw a gradual growth of the importance of magic. This was in line with its missionary policies to adapt to the local cultural environment. This, in turn, involved no disavowal of ancestral beliefs, aboriginal cults or even popular superstitions, but rather their integration within the doctrine.¹³²

The supernatural power of the Buddha's teachings came to be believed to be encapsulated, for instance, in mystical incantations (*dhāraṇī*) to be memorised. These were considered to contain special auspicious (*kuśala*) powers, and to prevent unwholesome (*akuśala*) influences. These could be inscribed on material objects which possessed magical value, just as scriptures do in the form of written manuscripts. In the course of time, both incantations and certain scriptures came to be used as protections (*paritta*), or 'safety-runes'.¹³³ In Sri Lanka, some aspects of magic, such as the science of exorcism (*bhūta-vijjā*), were officially introduced by Buddhist monarchs in 4th century.¹³⁴ Magical protective practices became widespread in South Asian Buddhist countries such as Sri Lanka, Thailand and Burma in the form of *paritta* and other rituals.¹³⁵ These were officiated by monks, or conducted by using the household *Book of Paritta* (*pirit-pota*)¹³⁶, chanted, even on radio and in public (political) events, to assure protection from all kinds of harm.¹³⁷ No doubt, certain counterparts of such protective practices can be found elsewhere, e.g. in Nepal¹³⁸, or China,¹³⁹ and other Buddhist countries. These rites, including the cult of popular gods, form part of the so-called 'little tradition' concerned with mundane goals, and distinguished from the 'great tradition', oriented towards *nirvāṇa*.¹⁴⁰

Contemporary attitudes to miracles are more diverse than ever before in history, and are a result of three main factors: the classical, text-based Buddhist interpretations outlined above; non-standard, popular Buddhist religiosity;¹⁴¹ local cults and traditional beliefs of non-Buddhist origins, as well as contacts with various modern trends or fashions with respect to the miraculous and the supernatural.

132 A comprehensive account in: LAMOTTE (1944–1980, IV: Chap. 43.4, 1860 ff. = 2001, IV: 1528 ff.).

133 Mil 150–151, translated in HORNER (1964, I: 210–211).

134 MVaṃ 36.113, p. 316, translated in GEIGER (1912: 264–265).

135 E.g. *ṣaḍaṅga* 'insertion of eyes' (*netra-pratiṣṭhāpana*) ceremonies, see RUELIUS (1978).

136 E.g. PIYADASSI (1981).

137 WALDSCHMIDT (1934), GOMBRICH (1988: 147–148), BLACKBURN (1999), PRANKE (2010/2011).

138 EMMRICH (2005).

139 See *Kao seng tchouan*, T 2059, k. 1, p. 328a, translated in SHIH (1968: 44); ZÜRCHER (2007: 22, 83–84, 103–104, 182–183), MCBRIDE (2005).

140 On the relation of these two traditions, see: BECHERT (1988–2000).

141 SCOTT (2010/2011).

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