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## Miracles in Indian Buddhist Narratives and Doctrine

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## Miracles in Indian Buddhist narratives and doctrine<sup>1</sup>

David V. Fiordalis

“False prophets can bring about false miracles through their magic arts, which are the same in appearance as true miracles wrought by true prophets through divine power.”

Pierre d’Ailly, *De falsis prophetis*<sup>2</sup>

Despite the fact that scholars have recognized for a long time that Buddhist literature contains numerous marvelous and fantastic events, there have been reservations about the use of the word “miracle” in the context of Buddhism. When the word has been used to speak about Buddhism, scholars have tended to note that Buddhist miracles are not “miracles in our Western sense,” speaking as though there were a single Western understanding of the concept that could be used to measure the Buddhist understanding. By contrast, scholars have generally been less reticent to speak of magic and magical powers in Buddhism. What they generally mean by preferring magic to miracle is that, in Buddhism, extraordinary powers are not thought to be violations of natural law. They

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Luis Gómez and John Strong for reading earlier drafts of this essay and making helpful comments. I also want to thank them, as well as Bradley Clough, Kristin Scheible, Rachele Scott and Patrick Pranke, for their participation in a panel at the IABS Congress in Atlanta, 2008, dedicated to the exploration of miracles and superhuman powers in South and Southeast Asian Buddhist texts and traditions. That conference panel and the essays currently collected in this issue of the *Journal*, which are based on the presentations made in Atlanta, testify to what we feel has been an enjoyable, timely and fruitful confluence of scholarly interest in the topic of the wonders and wonderment in Buddhist literature and beyond.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Caciola 2006: 295.

can be acquired through the use of mantras or meditation, and these are thought to be quite natural processes. Therefore, goes the argument, it is more appropriate to speak of marvels or wonders or magical powers in Buddhism.<sup>3</sup>

More work is needed to determine whether this generalization accurately portrays the complex and nuanced Buddhist discourse on the miraculous. One should note initially that these terminological preferences strongly reflect the Western history of the concepts of miracle and magic. These concepts have complicated and intertwining histories, having been conceived in tandem for many centuries. As the 14<sup>th</sup> century French Catholic theologian Pierre d'Ailly suggests in the quote above, discerning between miracles and magic has not always been easy. Traditionally, "miracle" has had a positive connotation, used to refer to wondrous events that a particular tradition, the Christian tradition, holds to be authentic and authoritative, while magic has been used pejoratively to refer to other traditions (or others within one's own tradition whose motives and authority one wishes to question). The application of the concept of magic has therefore been criticized on the grounds that it implies skepticism about the claims and motives of "others."<sup>4</sup> In a connected but distinct usage, magic also evokes images of ma-

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<sup>3</sup> For example, chapter twelve of Andy Rotman's recently published translation of the *Divyāvadāna* is the *Prātihārya-sūtra*, which Rotman translates "The Miracle Sūtra." In a footnote (Rotman 2008: 429, n. 580), he cites T. W. Rhys Davids' opinion that Buddhist miracles are not "miracles in our Western sense. There was no interference by an outside power with the laws of nature. It was supposed that certain people by reason of special (but quite natural) powers could accomplish certain special acts beyond the power of ordinary men." See Rhys Davids 1899, Vol. 1: 272. Thus, throughout his translation, Rotman speaks of the Buddha performing "miracles" (*prātihārya*) by means of his "magical powers" (*ṛddhi*), but for a Medieval Christian reader like Pierre d'Ailly, this would seemingly imply the falsehood of the displays.

<sup>4</sup> For one recent discussion and some useful references, see Burchett 2008. For another critique of the anthropological category of magic, see also de Sardan 1992. For the use of this terminology in modern anthropology, cognitive theory and psychology of religion, see, for instance, Rosengren, Johnson, and Harris, eds., 2000, and the various publications of Pascal Boyer. For references to Boyer's work and more, see Luis Gómez's discussion and bibliography in his article below.

gicians who entertain and amaze the gullible with illusions and trickery. Yet, in our Post-Harry Potter age, who would argue that “the magical” does not also have positive senses in many people’s minds, and that the term does not overlap considerably with miracles and marvels in describing a broad range of “supernatural” phenomena? These terms exist within a constellation of concepts that includes the natural and supernatural, divine and diabolical, as well as science and religion.<sup>5</sup> Their complex, interrelated history ought to make us pause before we sketch our generalizations too broadly across cultures, time periods and religious traditions.

As in Western discourse, one finds no single Buddhist understanding of the miraculous, but a plurality of voices and perspectives that likely changed over time. These Buddhist voices share a common, though complex and differentiated vocabulary, which they employ to describe an array of different types of “miracles,” “magic arts” and “superhuman powers.” Rather than eliminating one or another of our terms for translation at the outset, we need to consider all our vocabulary as we seek to understand the Buddhist discourse on the miraculous and to convey our understanding to others. Our words may still prove insufficient, but keeping our options open will at least allow us to show that Buddhist literature does sometimes draw its own distinctions between miracles and magic, even though these distinctions are inconsistently maintained. This may be seen through analysis of the common threefold classification of miracles in non-Mahāyāna Buddhist literature.<sup>6</sup>

In some Buddhist sources in Pāli and Sanskrit, rival ascetics call the Buddha a magician. In the *Upāli-sutta* of the *Majjhima-nikāya*, for instance, a Jain ascetic tries to dissuade Mahāvīra from sending his lay disciple, Upāli, to refute the Buddha’s doctrine, saying: “For the ascetic (i.e., the Buddha) is a magician (*māyāvin*). He knows a concealing magic by which he deceives the disciples of

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<sup>5</sup> For further explorations of this history, in addition to Caciola’s work cited above, see also Flint 1994 and Bartlett 2008.

<sup>6</sup> Here, the designation “non-Mahāyāna” also excludes Tantra. For recent treatment of the concepts of miracle and magic in the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* and selected Mahāyāna *sūtras* and *śāstras*, see Fiordalis 2008 and 2012. See also Luis Gómez’s article in the current volume of JIABS.

other ascetics' teachers."<sup>7</sup> In the *Sphuṭārthavyākhyā*, Yaśomitra's sub-commentary on the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*, the question is raised, "How do the other rival ascetics, such as Maskari Gośāla and others, criticize the Buddha?" Yaśomitra then gives two citations:

In a treatise of the Nirgranthas, it is said: "Who displays his superhuman powers (*ṛddhi*)? The magician Gotama does." Also, they say, "Every hundred ages a magician of this type appears in the world and cause the people to be consumed by his magic."<sup>8</sup>

In these examples, being called a magician carries a pejorative connotation, but it also portrays the grudging respect and resentment that the Buddha's rivals appear to feel towards him, at least as seen through the eyes of the Buddha's own followers. The Buddha is called a magician, because he displays his superhuman powers, but the quotes also suggest that the Buddha succeeds at winning a large following by doing so.

One may contrast such accusations with the Buddhist monastic rule that prohibits monks and nuns from displaying their superhuman powers in front of laypeople. This well-known rule appears in the *Cullavagga* of the Pāli Vinaya, where the Buddha criticizes the Arhat, Piṇḍola Bhāradvāja, for using his superhuman powers to fly up and retrieve a sandalwood bowl placed upon a scaffold by a skeptical layperson.<sup>9</sup> Alternate versions of the story

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<sup>7</sup> MN i.375.

<sup>8</sup> AKVy 319.

<sup>9</sup> Vin ii.112. In fact, the episode elicits two rules in the Pāli Vinaya. Monks and nuns are prohibited from displaying superhuman powers in front of the laity, and they should not use alms-bowls made of wood. This creates an ambiguity about precisely why the Buddha found Piṇḍola Bhāradvāja's act objectionable. Another version of this story, found in the *Dhammapada* commentary, provides more insight into the motivations of the characters, but interestingly remains ambiguous on precisely why the Buddha found the act objectionable. In that version, Piṇḍola Bhāradvāja seems to display his powers in order to prove the validity of the *dharma*, and not for the sake of the bowl, but when the Buddha asks Piṇḍola why he displayed his powers, no response is given before the Buddha prohibits the display of superhuman powers. See DhP-a iii.203. In both these versions, but far more strongly in the Vinaya, the Buddha appears to prohibit displays of superhuman powers

are also found in the Vinaya collections of the Dharmaguptakas, Mahīśāsakas, and Sarvāstivādins, as well as the Pāli commentary on the *Dhammapada*, where it prefaces the narrative cycle of the Buddha's miracles at Śrāvastī and Sāṅkāśya.<sup>10</sup> Yet, despite the fact that the Buddha claims in the *Cullavagga* that “miraculous displays of superhuman powers (*iddhi-pāṭihāriya*) will not generate faith in those without faith, nor increase the faith of the faithful,” and castigates Piṇḍola for displaying his powers for the sake of a mere bowl, many exceptions to the rule appear throughout Buddhist literature. Do these many exceptions justify the claim made by rival ascetics (through Buddhist sources) that the Buddha did, in fact, display his superhuman powers in order to win disciples, or at least that Buddhists told many stories that he did? Certainly, there are many stories of the Buddha's miracles, and some doctrinal discussions of miracles and superhuman powers put forth the view that such displays can and did bear positive results.

However, another scripture that criticizes such displays, and that has garnered a fair amount of attention from scholars in search of Buddhist views on the miraculous, is the *Kevaṭṭa-sutta* of the Dīgha-Nikāya.<sup>11</sup> It has been suggested that this scripture expresses a “rationalistic” perspective,<sup>12</sup> which it may, but it also may be said to distinguish between true miracles and false miracles or magic. In it, a lay follower named Kevaṭṭa suggests to the Buddha that he instruct his monks to perform “miraculous displays of superhuman power” (*iddhi-pāṭihāriya*) or “superhuman feats” (*uttari-manussa-dhamma*) so that the prosperous people of Nālandā will

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in front of laypeople, because he feels that Piṇḍola retrieved the bowl out of covetous desire for it.

<sup>10</sup> For a French translation of the Vinaya versions, see Chavannes and Lévi 1916: 233–247. For an English translation of the version in the *Dhammapada* commentary, see Burlingame 1921, Vol. 30: 35–38. For another discussion of Piṇḍola, see Strong 1979.

<sup>11</sup> DN i.211ff. The alternate spelling of the title and of the name of the Buddha's chief interlocutor in the discourse is *Kevaḍḍha*.

<sup>12</sup> Gómez 1977: 221. The passage does indeed seem to rationalize the wondrous in one sense, and that is by classifying it. For other discussions of the *Kevaṭṭa-sutta*, see Gethin 1987: 187, and Granoff 1996.

develop even more faith in him.<sup>13</sup> The Pāli commentary tells us what Kevaṭṭa might have had in mind: flying above the city and performing a pyrotechnic display for the townspeople below. The implication seems to be that the laypeople of Nālandā who bear witness to such a display would give even more support, material and otherwise, to the Buddhist *saṅgha*.

The Buddha's initial response sounds somewhat reluctant, if not downright perfunctory: "I don't give such instruction to the monks, saying, 'Go, monks, and perform miracles or superhuman feats for the white-clothed laypeople.'" Kevaṭṭa is persistent, however, and after he asks a third time, the Buddha gives the following explanation:

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

Here the Buddha mentions one of the most common classifications of miracles in Buddhist literature. It is found in a wide range of sources, with an important alternate list also attested in the *Mahāvastu*.<sup>14</sup> This standard threefold typology also appears in the

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<sup>13</sup> The Pāli term, *iddhi*, for which the Buddhist Sanskrit is *ṛddhi*, not *sid-dhi*, has no simple equivalent in English. Since it is derived from the root, *ardh*, to grow, the term literally means success or flourishing. My preference for translating it as "superhuman power," at least in this context, derives partly from the fact that Buddhist texts like this one sometimes gloss the term with *uttarimanussa-dhamma*, which can be translated more literally as a superhuman quality or characteristic. Another text that does so is the *Prātihārya-sūtra* of the *Divyāvadāna*. For a different, though related, sense of the term *uttarimanussa-dhamma*, see the fourth *pārājika* rule in the Pāli Vinaya (Vin iii.91ff.), which dictates that the punishment for those who lie about possessing "superhuman qualities" that they do not really possess is expulsion from the monastic order.

<sup>14</sup> See, for instance, Ps ii.227–229. The *Mahāvastu* contains the same threefold listing as above (Vol. 1: 238), but also attests a variant list (Mv iii.137–138): "miraculous displays of superhuman power" (*ṛddhi-prātihārya*), "miraculous displays of instruction" (*anusāsantī-prātihārya*), and "miracu-

*Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* and the *Catuṣpariṣat-sūtra*, as we will see below.

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

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

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

“That is why,” [the Buddha responded,] “I see danger in [such miraculous displays], and am troubled, ashamed and disgusted [by them].”<sup>15</sup>

Here, the Buddha raises doubts about the efficacy of displaying superhuman powers to impress skeptical people. He then goes on to laud teaching of the *dharma*, apparently suggesting that it is the true miracle.

Is the Buddha of this discourse speaking metaphorically when he calls teaching the *dharma* a type of miracle? If not, then how can teaching the *dharma* be considered a type of miracle? Perhaps the discourse means to align the display of superhuman powers with magic, separating the act of teaching the *dharma* from “superstition” in the same way that “rational science” is sometimes distinguished from “magic” (and “religion”). Although plausible, one problem with this interpretation is the fact that the semantic range of *vijjā* (Skt: *vidyā*), the term translated here as “magic,” includes the variety of mundane “sciences,” as well. Another prob-

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lous displays of teaching the *dharma*” (*dharma-deśanā-prātihārya*). This alternate suggests, perhaps, that the most significant underlying opposition in the tripartite scheme of miracles is that between superhuman powers and teaching the *dharma*.

<sup>15</sup> DN i.212–214. For stylistic reasons, my translation condenses two nearly identical exchanges into one.

lem is that the *Kevaṭṭa-sutta* does not suggest that the Buddha and other Buddhist monks do not actually possess various types of superhuman powers. Rather, it implies the opposite, while raising the question of how a skeptical person can discern between true miracles and false miracles or magic, an issue that we have seen also occupied Medieval Christian theologians. It would seem that both Buddhists and non-Buddhists accused each other of being magicians. Here, the *Kevaṭṭa-sutta* suggests that “magical powers” are ubiquitous, and thus their display does not necessarily prove the superiority or uniqueness of the Buddha and his message, as teaching the *dharma* seems to do.

The *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* also discusses the three types of miracles, arguing like the *Kevaṭṭa-sutta* that teaching the *dharma* is the best kind of miracle.<sup>16</sup> While the reasoning of the *Kevaṭṭa-sutta* is compressed into a few statements, Vasubandhu elucidates two lines of argument to explain why the miracle of teaching the *dharma* should be considered the best of the three miracles. Firstly, echoing the logic and terminology of the *Kevaṭṭa-sutta*, he argues that the first two types of miraculous display are also achievable by means of “magic spells.” For instance, the *Gāndhārī vidyā* gives one the power of flight, while the *Īkṣaṇikā vidyā* grants the power to know the thoughts of others. Not so for the miracle of teaching the *dharma*; one cannot teach the *dharma* simply by using a spell. Vasubandhu draws a parallel between the three types of miracle and the various capabilities that the Buddha achieves as part of his awakening. It is not possible, Vasubandhu argues, to perform the miracle of teaching the *dharma* without truly possessing the knowledge of the destruction of the defilements (*āśrava-kṣaya-jñāna*), which is the third of the so-called three “knowledges” (*vijjā, vidyā*) and the sixth of the so-called “super-knowledges” or “superpowers” (*abhiññā, abhijñā*).<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Chapter seven, verse forty-seven and commentary. AKBh 868–869.

<sup>17</sup> Note as well that the *Bodhisattvabhūmi* also articulates this parallel between the three types of “miracle” and the three relevant “super-knowledges.” See BoBhū, p. 54. For a detailed analysis of the *abhiññās* in Pāli canonical literature, see Bradley Clough’s article in the present volume of JIABS.

However one classifies it, the knowledge of the destruction of the defilements seems to involve both certainty about one's own attainments and true knowledge of the nature of reality (*yathā-bhūta-jñāna*). Such knowledge forms the basis for teaching the *dharma*, and perhaps this is why descriptions of it often make reference to basic Buddhist doctrines like the Four Noble Truths. Teaching the *dharma* would then provide evidence that a person has truly achieved "sainthood" (*arahantā*, *arhattvā*), for it is the unique possession of buddhas and Buddhist saints. Thus, for Vasubandhu, teaching the *dharma* is the best form of miracle, because it provides evidence of true sainthood, being based on knowledge of the true nature of reality.

To this extent, Vasubandhu seems to support the reasoning of the *Kevaṭṭa-sutta*. However, Vasubandhu gives a second line of reasoning to explain why the miracle of teaching the *dharma* is the best of the three miracles. He argues that the first two types of miraculous display are useful only for impressing people as to what is preeminent (*pradhāna-āvarjana-mātra*).<sup>18</sup> With the miracle of teaching the *dharma*, however, it is possible to obtain the preeminent, what one truly desires, the ultimate good (*hita*), freedom from suffering. "For," Vasubandhu writes, "it is said that true 'success' (*ṛddhi* – the term I have been translating 'superhuman power') is [achievable] only through teaching the means [of achieving freedom from suffering]."<sup>19</sup> Vasubandhu's second line of argument seems to be that teaching the *dharma* is foremost among the miracles, because it will ultimately lead the faithful person along the path to the ultimate good.

While teaching the *dharma* is still seen by Vasubandhu as the best type of Buddhist miracle, he also seems to accept on this second line of reasoning that miraculous displays of superhuman powers and telepathic ability can play an important role. They are efficacious for the purposes of initial conversion. This more moderate

<sup>18</sup> For further discussion of this phrase, see Luis Gómez's article below (Gómez 2011: 517).

<sup>19</sup> *anuśāsanaprātihāryeṇa tu hitena iṣṭeṇa phaleṇa yogo bhavaty upāyopadeśād ity evāvaśyaṃ ṛddhir ity ucyate*. AKBh 869.

position on the display of superhuman powers is also indicated by Vasubandhu's discussion of the meaning of the word, *prātihārya*, the word that I have been translating as "miracle." Vasubandhu defines *prātihārya* as "at the outset, carrying away (*haraṇa*) people who are ready to be disciplined (*vineyamanas*)." He explains the verbal prefix *prāti-* as a combination of two prefixes, *pra* + *ati*, the former signifying "the beginning" and the latter "extreme intensity."<sup>20</sup> Or, Vasubandhu tells us, miracles are called *prātihārya* because they "seize" (*pratiharanti*) people who hate or are indifferent to the *dharma*.<sup>21</sup> One may doubt the philological accuracy of these etymological explanations, but there can be little doubt that they are intended to draw a clear connection between miracles and religious conversion.<sup>22</sup>

In these Buddhist discussions of miracles and superhuman powers, one can perhaps hear an echo of another way in which miracles have sometimes been distinguished from magic. In the words of

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<sup>20</sup> *vineyamanasāmādito 'tyarthaṃ haraṇāt prātihāryāṇi prātisabdāyor ādikarmabhṛṣārthatvāt*. AKBh 869.

<sup>21</sup> *pratihatamadhyasthānāṃ manāṃsyebhiḥ pratiharantīti prātihāryāṇi vā*. AKBh 869.

<sup>22</sup> Here, the term "conversion" is used primarily to cover the sense of the Sanskrit terms given above, namely, *prātihārya* and *āvarjana*. Nevertheless, the use of the term also brings up issues of comparative analysis not dealt with here. Though a full exploration is beyond the scope of this article, it bears mentioning that the connection between miracles, displays of superhuman power and religious conversion in the sense used here is emphasized and further developed in Mahāyāna Buddhist narrative and doctrine. According to the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-upadeśaśāstra*, the bodhisattva develops the "superpowers" (*abhiññā*) in the interest of other beings and performs miracles so that the minds of other beings may become pure. If the bodhisattva did not perform miracles, he would not be able to inspire as many beings to strive for the ultimate good. See Lamotte 1944–1980, Vol. 4: 1819–1820. The *Bodhisattvabhūmi* (BoBhū p. 46) also explains that one of the purposes of "superhuman power" (*rddhi*) is to introduce people into the Buddha's teaching by "converting" (*āvarjayitvā*) them with a miraculous display. See Gómez's discussion and translation of this passage in his article in this volume of JIABS (Gómez 2011: 531). There are nevertheless Mahāyāna critiques of displays of superhuman powers, particularly in the Chan/Zen traditions. See Gómez 1977 and Bielefeldt 2002.

Richard Swinburne, miracles must have “religious significance,” that is, they must “contribute significantly towards a holy divine purpose for the world.” By contrast, “extraordinary events lacking religious significance are more appropriately characterized as magical or psychic phenomena rather than as miracles.”<sup>23</sup> While the distinction between religion and magic remains problematic (as does the term “conversion”), along with the meaning and application of these terms in a Buddhist context, some Buddhist narratives and doctrinal discussions seem to suggest that certain events are made miraculous by reason of their connection to the Buddha’s sacred mission to lead people beyond suffering. Acts of teaching the *dharma* and displays of superhuman powers are clearly among them.

A miracle story from the *Avadāna-śataka*, a 1<sup>st</sup> century collection of Buddhist narratives, includes a passage on miracle suggestive of this sacred purpose. The tenth story of the eighth *varga* features a woman named Virūpa so distressed that she tries to commit suicide by hanging herself in a cave. Just as she is about to do so, the Buddha (apparently using his superhuman powers) becomes aware of her and emits a golden light from his body, which cuts the rope. At this point, the story lapses into a semi-scholastic list seemingly meant to explain the miracle. According to the story, six “conditions” (*sthāna*), when manifested in the world, “produce” (*prādurbhāva*) a “miracle” (*āścāryādbhuta*): “1) the Buddha, 2) the *dharma* and Vinaya taught by the Buddha, 3) a human being, 4) born in the land of the Āryas, 5) having all the sense organs in working order, 6) (and) freely desiring the good *dharma*.”<sup>24</sup> Among other things, this list suggests that Buddhist miracles are not mere wonders, but somehow derive from the Buddha’s mission or purpose

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<sup>23</sup> Swinburne 1970: 8–9. One should also note that Swinburne, having made this point, proceeds with his analysis based on Hume’s definition of miracle as a violation of natural law. One may usefully compare with the definition and treatment of miracles found in MacCulloch 1908, Vol. 8: 676–690.

<sup>24</sup> Avś ii.55. The passage does not clearly differentiate the six conditions. My division reflects my own interpretation, but there are certainly other ways of dividing this list into six components.

to lead living beings to freedom from suffering. After performing the miracle, the Buddha teaches the *dharma* to Virūpa, who then becomes an *arhantī*. Notice how the story seems to integrate the three types of miracle (manifesting superhuman powers, telepathic ability, and teaching the *dharma*) within a single narrative.

In order to get a fuller sense of a Buddhist miracle, the three-fold typology of miracles found in the *Kevaṭṭa-sutta* and elsewhere ought to be compared with another typology present in the Pāli commentaries, but also found in a variety of forms elsewhere. This second typology lists specific events that constitute the skeleton of the Buddha's final lifetime. For instance, in the commentary on the *Mahāpadāna-sutta* of the Dīgha-Nikāya, one finds the following statement:

[As Bodhisattvas in our final birth], we will display miracles (*pāṭihāriya*) that will, among other things, shake the earth, which is bounded by the circle of ten thousand mountains, when (1) the all-knowing Bodhisattva enters his mother's womb, (2) is born, (3) attains awakening, (4) turns the wheel of the *dharma*, (5) performs the "Twin Miracle" (*yamaka-pāṭihāriya*), (6) descends from the realm of the gods, (7) releases his life force, [and] (8) attains cessation.<sup>25</sup>

In his ground-breaking article on the miracle of Śrāvastī, Alfred Foucher highlights another important example of an eightfold series of such events, a 5<sup>th</sup> century stele found at Sārnāth with eight panels depicting a slightly different set of events.<sup>26</sup> These lists of events in the last life of the Buddha can be related to a wider set of lists of varying lengths, including lists of four, five, six, twelve, and even a list of thirty. Classified under different names, from "miracles" (*pāṭihāriya*) to "wondrous and amazing things" (*ac-*

<sup>25</sup> DN-a ii.412. It is interesting to compare this series of events with the list of causes of earthquakes found in the *Mahāpāriniṣṭhāna-sutta* (DN ii.108–109). At some point between *sutta* and commentary, natural causes and the superhuman powers of śramaṇas, brāhmaṇas and gods have been replaced by the miracle of Śrāvastī and the descent from the Heaven of the Thirty-three.

<sup>26</sup> Foucher 1909. English translation in Foucher 1917. For the image, see Foucher 1917, fig. 19.1. In the stele, the Buddha's conception and the release of his life-force are replaced with episodes in which the Buddha tames the maddened elephant and receives a gift of honey from a monkey.

*chariya-abbhuta-dhamma, āścārya-adbhūta-dharma*) to “events that the Buddha must perform” (*avaśya-karaṇīya*), these events collectively form what John Strong has called the “Buddha-life blueprint.”<sup>27</sup>

As the quote above suggests, the fact that earthquakes and other “wondrous and amazing things” occur during these events is one of the characteristics connecting them as miracles. Such signs and wonders help to indicate their “religious significance.”<sup>28</sup> If one compares the threefold typology with this list of eight miracles, certain events come into focus, such as the first sermon and the miracle cycle at Śrāvastī and Sāṅkāśya, examples in which the Buddha teaches the *dharma* or displays his superhuman powers in order to win converts and further his mission. Another event that is not contained in the above lists, but nonetheless sheds an important light on the tension contained in the threefold typology of miracles, particularly between teaching the *dharma* and displaying superhuman powers, is the story of the conversion of the three Kāśyapa brothers.

Described as a “thaumaturgical impasse,”<sup>29</sup> the story of the conversion of the Kāśyapa brothers, three rival Brahmin ascetics with many followers of their own, occurs in the narrative cycle at the beginning of the *Mahāvagga* of the Pāli Vinaya. The sequence begins just after the Buddha’s awakening and tells the story of how the Buddha establishes his ministry and wins his first disciples. Thus, it includes other well-known events, such as the first and second sermons, as well as the conversions of Yaśas, King Bimbisāra, Śāriputra and Maudgalyāyana. The narrative cycle is also present in the Vinaya collections of other mainstream Buddhist schools and in the *Catuṣpariṣat-sūtra*, while the *Mahāvastu* contains an alternate version of the story of the three Kāśyapas.<sup>30</sup> Comparing

<sup>27</sup> John Strong 2001: 10–13.

<sup>28</sup> One might compare this with the Chinese concept of “resonance,” discussed in Kieschnick 1997: 96ff.

<sup>29</sup> Gómez 1977: 222.

<sup>30</sup> The passages in the Vinaya collections of the Mahāvihāra Theravāda (i.e. the Pāli version), Mahīśāsaka, and Dharmaguptaka have been ana-

several versions of this story not only clarifies the relationship that was thought to exist between the three types of miracles; it illustrates that different Buddhists conceived this relationship differently.

The basic story of the impasse, as it appears in the *Mahāvagga* and in the *Caṭuṣpariṣat-sūtra*, is as follows. In his attempt to convert the eldest Kāśyapa brother, the Buddha performs many displays of his superhuman powers. After the performance of each miracle, which the *Mahāvagga* suggests numbered 3,500 in total,<sup>31</sup> Kāśyapa thinks to himself, “Certainly, the great ascetic possesses great superhuman power (*mahā-iddhika*), great, wondrous presence (*mahā-anubhāva*)...but he is no saint (*arahant*) like I am.”<sup>32</sup> Thus, the Buddha and Kāśyapa reach an impasse. After many displays of superhuman power, Kāśyapa remains unconverted. The point thus far appears to be that displays of superhuman power are insufficient to establish the superiority of the Buddha and convert the rival ascetic.

Interestingly, however, the first of the Buddha’s displays of superhuman power in the *Mahāvagga*, and by visual accounts the one most closely associated with the occasion, sufficiently impresses

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lyzed in detail by André Bareaux (1963). In addition to these versions is the *Caṭuṣpariṣat-sūtra*, which is nearly identical to the version found in the Mūlasarvāstivāda-vinaya. Bareaux does not include an extensive analysis of the Mūlasarvāstivāda-vinaya or the *Caṭuṣpariṣat-sūtra*. For an explanation of his reasons for not doing so, see Bareaux 1963: 8–9. For the Sanskrit edition of the *Caṭuṣpariṣat-sūtra*, as well as the Tibetan, see CPS. For the *Mahāvastu* version, see Mv iii.425ff.

<sup>31</sup> Vin i.34. The early translators, T. W. Rhys Davids and Hermann Oldenberg, suggest that the passage containing this reference to the total number of miracles was interpolated, perhaps due to the fact that the comment seems rather out of place in the flow of the narrative. See Rhys Davids and Oldenberg 1885, Vol. 3: 133. There is no such phrase in other versions of the story. See Bareaux 1963: 316. Whether it is a later addition or not, the passage nevertheless emphasizes the fact that the Buddha performed many marvelous displays of superhuman power on the occasion. In the *Caṭuṣpariṣat-sūtra*, the number of miracles totals eighteen.

<sup>32</sup> Vin i.32. In the *Caṭuṣpariṣat-sūtra*, sometimes Kāśyapa alternatively says, “...but I am a saint like him” CPS 244. Other versions also alternate between the two phrases.

Kāśyapa that he invites the Buddha to stay with his community and agrees to provide him with material support. For his first miracle, the Buddha asks to spend a night in Kāśyapa's fire-lodge. Kāśyapa is reluctant to allow it, because a fierce, fire-breathing snake also lives in the fire-lodge, and he is concerned the Buddha might be hurt. The Buddha insists, however, and Kāśyapa finally relents. So, the Buddha spends the night in the fire-lodge and succeeds in taming the fire-breathing serpent through a miraculous display of his power over the element of fire. The snake and the Buddha engage in a duel of fire, with the snake breathing smoke and fire, and the Buddha, by means of the "fire-element concentration" (*tejodhātasamādhi*), emitting flames from his own body, until finally the snake is subdued. The next morning, the Buddha emerges from the fire-hut with the serpent coiled up in his alms bowl, providing an image that is used to depict the event in Buddhist art.<sup>33</sup>

The language used in the *Mahāvagga* to describe Kāśyapa's reaction to this miraculous display is important to consider. Kāśyapa becomes "serene (*abhippasanna*) as a result of this miraculous display of superhuman power" (*iminā iddhipāṭihāriyena*), and invites the Buddha to stay. One might say that he becomes receptive to the faith. The word I have translated as serene is merely an adjectival form derived from the Pāli term *pasāda* or *prasāda* in Sanskrit. *Prasāda* is a complex concept without a simple equivalent in English. It means faith and trust, but also beauty and serenity, as when the mind is unclouded and free of doubt. It also means mental receptivity to faith, as characterized by awe and veneration. The literal meaning of the term, *prasanna*, "settled," also evokes a sense of purity and clarity. When dirty water has been allowed to sit and the sediment has sunk to the bottom, the clear water that remains is *prasanna*.

Returning to our story, only the Pāli version contains this description of Kāśyapa's reaction. Curiously, the entire episode of the taming of the snake is told twice in the Pāli, first in prose and then again in verse. In the prose portion of the *Mahāvagga*, as in the versions found in the Vinayas of other mainstream Buddhist

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<sup>33</sup> Rhi 1991: 71. For a few images, see Ingholt and Lyons 1957, figs. 87–89.

schools and in the *Catuṣpariṣat-sūtra*, Kāśyapa's reaction remains merely skeptical. The Buddha may have power, Kāśyapa thinks, but he is not my equal, or alternatively, he is merely my equal. Only the sentence that concludes the versified version in the Pāli describes Kāśyapa as serene as a result of the miraculous display of superpower. By using the term, *abhippasanna*, the text may simply be trying to say that Kāśyapa is pleased with the Buddha's performance, but it may also reflect the fact that Kāśyapa is becoming receptive to the Buddha's advances. One could say that this miraculous display of superhuman power does what Vasubandhu suggests that such displays ought to do. It makes an initial impression that leads to Kāśyapa's conversion.

Kāśyapa is not converted by the snake-taming miracle, however. Only in the version found in the *Mahāvastu* is Kāśyapa converted by the snake-taming miracle, but that version differs from the others in several other important respects as well. For one thing, the snake-taming miracle occurs at the end of the sequence of miracles, not the beginning. Another important difference is that, in the *Mahāvastu*, the Buddha and Kāśyapa both display their superhuman powers in a wonderworking contest, which the Buddha eventually wins. Most versions suggest, on the contrary, that Kāśyapa does not display his own powers. His conversion occurs only after a series of unsuccessful displays of the Buddha's superhuman powers. In the *Mahāvagga*, for example, the Buddha finally uses his telepathic powers to become aware of Kāśyapa's continued insistence that he is equal to or greater than the Buddha, and determines that "the confused man will continue to think thus for a long time."

Therefore, the Buddha decides to "shock" (*saṃvejayan*) him.<sup>34</sup> He says to Kāśyapa, "You are not a saint, Kāśyapa, nor have you attained the path to sainthood. The path you walk will not lead you to become a saint, nor will it lead you to the path to sainthood."<sup>35</sup> It

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<sup>34</sup> For a classic discussion of the concept of *saṃvega*, see Coomaraswamy 2004. For further discussion of the concepts of *pasāda* and *saṃvega*, and their importance in another interesting miracle story of the Buddha, the story of the Buddha's journey to the island of Sri Lanka, see Kristin Scheible's article in this volume.

<sup>35</sup> Vin i.32.

seems that this trenchant demonstration of the Buddha's ability to read Kāśyapa's thoughts has the desired effect. In the *Catuspariṣat-sūtra*, although no reference is made to the Buddha's intentions, once the Buddha has contradicted him outright, Kāśyapa thinks to himself, "The great ascetic knows my mind with his mind!"<sup>36</sup> He then converts to Buddhism. It may seem that the employment of telepathic ability is somewhat anti-climactic after the wondrous displays of so many superhuman abilities. Yet, the Buddha's ability to read Kāśyapa's mind, coupled with Kāśyapa's inability to read the Buddha's, provides a clear indication of his superiority.<sup>37</sup> In the story of the Buddha's miracles at Śrāvastī in the *Divyāvadāna*, it is stated that even lesser beings, such as tiny biting ants, can read the Buddha's "mundane" (*laukika*) thoughts, but not even solitary buddhas, the Buddha's disciples or the gods can perceive his "supermundane" (*lokottara*) thoughts.<sup>38</sup>

In any case, if an important theme of the story were the ineffectiveness of superhuman powers to convert Kāśyapa, then one would expect to find a clearer contrast between the displays of superhuman powers, telepathy and teaching the *dharma*. If one ignores the verse section and focuses only on the prose, then perhaps the Pāli version suggests such a contrast, but in the Mahīśāsaka-vinaya, for instance, the Buddha contradicts Kāśyapa while levitating in the air.<sup>39</sup> If the point were to emphasize the ineffectiveness

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<sup>36</sup> CPS 302.

<sup>37</sup> The significance of the Buddha's ability to read the minds of others in the Pāli *nikāyas* is amply demonstrated in Brad Clough's article in this volume.

<sup>38</sup> See Divy 161. Again, although it lies beyond the scope of the current article, the distinction between *laukika* and *lokottara* is highly operative in Buddhist discussions of miracles and superhuman powers, and it may be one of the best places to begin exploring Buddhist notions that roughly approximate Western distinctions between the natural and supernatural. I hope to explore this distinction in further detail in a future article, but for the moment one may refer to discussions of it in the articles by Pat Pranke and Brad Clough in the present volume.

<sup>39</sup> Bateau 1963: 304. For discussions of the importance of levitation in South Asian religions, see Hocart 1923, Brown 1928, Mahony 1987 and Strong 1983.

of superhuman powers, then this would seem decidedly odd. Thus, alternate versions of the story suggest that not all Buddhists drew a sharp contrast between the different types of miraculous displays. In fact, although it is true that the Buddha converts Kāśyapa in the *Mahāvagga* and *Catuṣpariṣat-sūtra* by means of the display of his telepathic ability, the Buddha uses all three types of miracle in these stories, one after the other, and more or less equally.

The Buddha first employs his superhuman powers, then utilizes his telepathic abilities, and finally teaches the *dharma*. Specifically, the Buddha preaches the famous “Fire Sermon.” The theme of fire is an important one throughout the story of the Kāśyapa brothers. The Kāśyapa brothers are said to make fire sacrifices before their conversion. The Buddha chooses to impress Kāśyapa by taming his fire-breathing snake, and he does so by relying on his own mastery of fire. Finally, the Buddha returns to the theme of fire in the Fire Sermon, expressing the teaching that “everything is on fire” (*sabbaṃ ādittaṃ*). Here burning is made into a metaphor for the fact that all conditioned things are conjoined with passion, hatred, and confusion, the three root afflictions. So, the Buddha uses the metaphor of fire to teach the fire-worshipping Kāśyapa brothers about detachment. It seems that the editor of the *Catuṣpariṣat-sūtra* also recognized the importance of fire in the story, because the description of the Buddha’s awakening that prefaces the text specifically mentions the fire-element concentration, the only description of the Buddha’s awakening to do so, so far as I am aware.

After hearing this teaching, the three Kāśyapa brothers and their followers all become Arhats. Thus, from the various versions of the story, it seems not only that superhuman powers and telepathic abilities are effective and possibly necessary (though maybe insufficient) means of conversion, but also that teaching the *dharma* is a type a miracle insofar as it leads people to the “greatest good,” to use Vasubandhu’s phrase. Although the Pāli version does not explicitly use the typology of three types of miracle to refer to the various events that occur in the story, the *Catuṣpariṣat-sūtra* and alternate versions in other Vinaya collections do structure the narrative in terms of the three types of miracles, with the Fire Sermon explicitly described as a miracle of teaching the *dharma*.

When the Fire Sermon is described as a miracle of teaching the *dharma*, something curious also occurs in the description of the miracle of mind-reading in the *Catuspariṣat-sūtra*. If one compares it with the description of the miracles of mind-reading and teaching the *dharma* in the *Kevaṭṭa-sutta*, it appears that the two types of miracles have been condensed into one, or perhaps vice versa. Here is the description of the miracle of mind-reading in the *Catuspariṣat-sūtra*, restored with the help of the Tibetan translation of the Mūlasarvāstivāda-vinaya:

Monks, this is your mind (*cittam*). This is [your] mind (*manas*). This is [your] consciousness (*viññānam*). Consider (*vitarkayata*) this. Don't consider that. Think about (*manasikuruta*) this. Don't think about that. Abandon (*prajahata*) this. Don't abandon that. Having taken up (*upāsampadya*) this and realized [it] directly with the body, practice it.<sup>40</sup>

Now, compare this with the description of the miracles of mind-reading and teaching the *dharma* in the *Kevaṭṭa-sutta*. First look at the description of mind-reading:

This, Kevaṭṭa, [is the miracle of mind-reading ability.] A monk points out (*ādisati*) the very mind (*cittaṃ pi*) of another being, another person. He points out the very mental state (*cetasikaṃ pi*). He knows the gross thoughts; he knows the subtle thoughts (*vitakkaṃ pi ādisati; vicāritaṃ pi ādisati*). [And he says,] “This is in your mind (*cittam*). This is your mind (*mano*). Your mind is here.”

And here is the description of the miracle of instruction or teaching the *dharma* in the *Kevaṭṭa-sutta*:

Consider (*vittakketha*) this. Don't consider that. Think (*manasikarotha*) this way. Don't think that way. Renounce (*pajahatha*) this. Having taken up this (*idam upasampajja*), practice [it].<sup>41</sup>

The parallel phraseology of these passages is striking in that the *Catuspariṣat-sūtra* includes, as one single passage, a slightly condensed, but clearly parallel version of the explanations of both the second and the third types of miracle, which are so strongly

<sup>40</sup> CPS 320.

<sup>41</sup> DN i.213–214.

opposed in the *Kevaṭṭa-sutta*.<sup>42</sup> This parallel raises some difficult questions about the intertextual history of the tripartite scheme, as well as the interrelationship between the three types of miracles, particularly the miracles of mind-reading and instruction. In this context, we should recall the alternate classification of the three miracles found in the *Mahāvastu*, where the second and third types of miracles are the “miracle of instruction” (*anusāsani-prātihārya*) and the “miracle of teaching the *dharma*” (*dharma-deśanā-prātihārya*), respectively.<sup>43</sup> This classification seems to bear a strong resemblance to the descriptions of the three types of miracles that we find in the *Catuṣpariṣat-sūtra*. What are we to make of these alternate classifications and descriptions of the three types of miracles, and can we assume beyond doubt that one is necessarily earlier or later than the others?

The story of the conversion of the Kāśyapa brothers in the *Mahāvagga* and *Catuṣpariṣat-sūtra* depicts the three miracles in an ordered sequence. While the *Kevaṭṭa-sutta* suggests that some Buddhists tried to create a tension between displaying superhuman powers or telepathic abilities and teaching the *dharma*, the story of the conversion of the Kāśyapa brothers suggests that not all Buddhists perceived this tension in the same way. Some may not have perceived any tension, at all.<sup>44</sup> In the case of the so-called

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<sup>42</sup> In addition, a sequence of miracles more or less corresponding to those of the *Catuṣpariṣat-sūtra* occurs on the 11<sup>th</sup>, 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> days, respectively, of the miracle at Śrāvastī in the version found in the Dharmaguptaka-vinaya. Indeed, on the thirteenth day, the Buddha is said therein to preach the Fire Sermon. See Takakusu and Watanabe, eds., 1924–1932, Vol. 22, number 1428: 949c–950a. English translation is in Rhi 1991: 234–235.

<sup>43</sup> See n. 14 above.

<sup>44</sup> Indeed, this point can be strengthened by returning to the *Kevaṭṭa-sutta*. As we now possess it, the *sutta* appears to contrast the “miraculous display of instruction” (*anusāsani-pāṭihāriya*) with the miraculous displays of superhuman powers and telepathy, as we saw above, but then directly afterwards it equates the miracle of instruction with various other attainments that are commonly found throughout the *suttas* of the Dīgha-Nikāya. Among them are mastery of the four states of meditation (*jhāna*), the ability to create mind-made bodies, the various superhuman powers (*iddhi*), the other “superknowledges” (*abhīññā*), including telepathy and so forth. All these attain-

“Twin Miracle” (*yamaka-pāṭihāriya*), performed by the Buddha at Śrāvastī, one finds another instance in which the three types of miracles appear to be employed equally and more or less simultaneously. Here is a pertinent passage from the *Dhammapada* commentary’s description of the event:

On that day, the Teacher walked up and down performing the [Twin] Miracle, and as he did so, he taught the *dharmā* to the audience, not wearying them with uninterrupted discourse, but giving them sufficient opportunity to refresh themselves from time to time. Thereupon, the audience sent up shouts of applause. Hearing the shouts of applause that arose from the audience, the Teacher straightaway looked into the hearts of the great multitude, and in sixteen ways perceived the disposition of mind of each one. So quick is the movement of the mind of the Buddhas, that in case any person took pleasure (*pasanna*) in any teaching or in any display of superhuman power, the Buddha taught the *dharmā* and displayed his superhuman power in accordance with the temper and disposition of each person. As he thus taught the *dharmā* and displayed his superhuman powers, a great multitude of living beings obtained clear comprehension of the *dharmā*.<sup>45</sup>

Here, displaying superhuman powers, telepathic abilities and teaching the *dharmā* are combined into one miraculous display, with the passage concluding by emphasizing its great efficacy.

At this point in the story, the Buddha again appears to read the minds of those in the audience, and thus concludes that no one is capable of asking him appropriate questions. So, he magically produces a double of himself, and he and his double engage each other in a dialogue on the *dharmā*, resulting in many more millions

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ments, including those the miraculous display of which the Buddha criticizes just beforehand, are equated with the miracle of instruction in the *Kevaṭṭasutta*. Despite this fact, virtually all modern translations, from Rhys Davids onwards, have been abbreviated in such a way as to make this contradiction less apparent. For the redactors of the *Dīgha-Nikāya*, however, perhaps there was no clear contradiction between displaying superhuman powers and teaching the *dharmā*. For an alternative discussion of this issue and different conclusions, see Meisig 1993. I owe John Strong for this reference and for impressing upon me the irony of this apparent contradiction in the text.

<sup>45</sup> Dhp-a iii.215. My translation modifies slightly that of Burlingame 1921, Vol. 3: 47.

of beings attaining comprehension of the *dharma*. Thus, on one interpretation, even the Twin Miracle itself combines the display of superhuman power and the act of teaching the *dharma*. While the miracle performed at Śrāvastī is arguably the paradigmatic example in Buddhist literature of the Buddha displaying his superhuman powers, and despite the fact that the display is greatly embellished in this and other versions of the story, later artistic representations of the event continue to depict the Buddha in the gesture of teaching, perhaps indicating that teaching the *dharma* remained an important component of the miracle in the minds of some Buddhists.<sup>46</sup>

This essay has explored doctrinal discussions of the three types of miracles, using this typology to analyze a few Buddhist miracle narratives, which in turn, simultaneously clarify and obscure the tripartite classification. Not all Buddhist miracle tales refer to the three types of miracles, however. Nor do all of them seek to distinguish displays of superhuman power or telepathic ability from acts of teaching the *dharma*, or to criticize the display of the former. Among other things, miracle tales of the Buddha are concerned with demonstrating in one way or another his superiority vis-à-vis divine beings of various types, Buddhist disciples of various levels of attainment, rival teachers, and others, while highlighting the religious significance of the Buddha's sacred mission.<sup>47</sup> Oftentimes, these goals are achieved precisely through the display of superhu-

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<sup>46</sup> Many such images from Gandhāra are listed in Rhi 1991: 197–206. For a few examples, see Ingholt and Lyons 1957, figs. 252ff.; Kurita 1988–1990, Vol. 1, figs. 400–401, Vol. 2, fig. 79; Foucher 1917, figs. 19.1, 20, 21.1, 23.1–2, 25.2–26.2; Huntington 1986, figs. 2–4. Brown 1984, figs. 6, 9–10.

<sup>47</sup> John Strong has also studied a range of stories that feature the failure of the power of flight on the part of Buddhist monks and even the Buddha himself in a former birth. One would think that such stories would work against the idea that the Buddha and his monks and nuns are superior to others who possess superhuman powers. Rather than reducing the prestige of the Buddha and his monks, however, Strong argues that such stories also emphasize their superiority, paradoxically, by indicating that their powers are the real thing. See Strong 1983. A revised and unpublished English version, “When Magical Flight Fails: A Study of Some Indian Legends about the Buddha and his Disciples,” was presented by Professor Strong at the University of Michigan on March 28, 2008.

man powers. Rivals may be exposed as magicians or frauds, while the Buddha dominates or outpaces them with his own superhuman powers, which are greater, in terms of raw power, than their own.<sup>48</sup> In a similar vein, miracle tales featuring eminent Buddhist monks and nuns who display their superhuman powers may, in addition to demonstrating their own attainments, establish by extension the preeminence of the Buddha, his teachings and institutions.<sup>49</sup>

In conclusion, work remains to be done to understand the nature and significance of “miracles,” “magic,” and “superhuman powers” throughout a fuller range of Buddhist narrative and doctrine. Yet, scholars have been too quick to conclude from a few scant criticisms of displaying superhuman powers that Buddhism rejects the miraculous wholesale in favor of some sort of rational humanism that reflects modern predilections. For one thing, making this argument requires that one disregard the many Buddhist stories in which the Buddha or his eminent disciples perform acts of conversion by displaying their superhuman powers. Scholars have suggested that such stories are merely “popular” or represent “later” (often a euphemism for degenerate) traditions. Yet, these are problematic conclusions. This investigation has focused primarily upon what are, by most accounts, elite narrative and scholastic traditions. Some of the stories considered here, such as those from the Vinaya collections of the mainstream Buddhist schools, may even date from a relatively early period.<sup>50</sup> Just how early is difficult to say and

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<sup>48</sup> An example of this is the story of Sirigutta and Garahadinna, found in the *Dhammapada* commentary (Dhp-a i.435–445). The similarity of this story to the Mahāyāna *sūtra* known as “The Prophecy of the Magician Bhadra” (*Bhadramāyākara-vyākaraṇa*) has been recognized by Konstanty Régamey (1990).

<sup>49</sup> The story of Piṇḍola Bhāradvāja in the *Dhammapada* commentary is one such example. See n. 9 above. For another, see Rachele Scott’s discussion in this volume of the important story of Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī’s *nirvāṇa*, which was translated for the first time into any Western language by Jonathan Walters (1995).

<sup>50</sup> There has been some scholarly debate on the age of the relevant section of the Vinaya relative to other portions of the collection. For one theory, see Frauwallner 1956: 154. For a critical assessment of his theory, see Lamotte

I will not proceed to speculate here, but more and more, scholars of Buddhism are coming to see the “popular” reflected in the “elite” and vice versa. When we calibrate our reading of Buddhist stories to the terms that Buddhists use, then even ostensibly familiar events, like the first sermon, the paradigmatic example of teaching the *dharma* and also an act of conversion, can take on new shades of meaning.

The other major argument that has been used to deny the significance of miracles in Buddhism is comparative. If a miracle is defined as a violation of the laws of nature by a supernatural agent, then perhaps displays of superhuman power in Buddhism do not fit this definition. Yet, one may question the adequacy of this definition, even with respect to a Western context. There are other important elements to the concept of the miracle, such as the wondrous signs and portents that accompany such events. Above all, one could argue, miracles provide evidence of the beneficence and holiness of the agent. That is, they have religious significance for the world. When defined in such a way, this concept of miracle then becomes relevant to Buddhism. However, discerning miracles from magic also then becomes important. The ambivalence towards the display of superhuman powers in Buddhist literature derives, at least in part, from questions about its evidentiary value in a world in which it is difficult to discern between “true” miracles and “false” ones. While the distinction is not always clearly maintained, we have seen that Buddhist literature does indeed sometimes distinguish between miracles and magic in order to argue for the supremacy and unique holiness of the Buddha, and by extension, his doctrines, institutions and eminent disciples.

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Volume 33 Number 1–2 2010 (2011)

## Articles

William CHU

*The timing of Yogācāra resurgence in the Ming dynasty  
(1368–1643)* . . . . . 5

Vincent ELTSCHINGER

*Ignorance, epistemology and soteriology – Part II* . . . . . 27

Richard F. NANCE

*Tall tales, tathāgatas, and truth – On the “privileged lie” in  
Indian Buddhist literature.* . . . . . 75

Alexander WYNNE

*The ātman and its negation – A conceptual and chronologi-  
cal analysis of early Buddhist thought* . . . . . 103

## Indian Buddhist metaethics

Contributions to a panel at the XV<sup>th</sup> Congress of the International  
Association of Buddhist Studies, Atlanta, 23–28 June 2008

Guest editor: Martin T. Adam

Peter HARVEY

*An analysis of factors related to the kusala/akusala quality  
of actions in the Pāli tradition . . . . .* 175

Abraham VÉLEZ DE CEA

*Value pluralism in early Buddhist ethics . . . . .* 211

Martin T. ADAM

*No self, no free will, no problem – Implications of the Anatta-  
lakkhaṇa Sutta for a perennial philosophical issue . . . . .* 239

Bronwyn FINNIGAN

*Buddhist metaethics . . . . .* 267

Stephen JENKINS

*On the auspiciousness of compassionate violence . . . . .* 299

Jay L. GARFIELD

*What is it like to be a bodhisattva? Moral phenomenology in  
Śāntideva's Bodhicaryāvatāra . . . . .* 333

Tom J. F. TILLEMANS

*Madhyamaka Buddhist ethics . . . . .* 359

**Miracles and superhuman powers in South and Southeast  
Asian Buddhist traditions**

Contributions to a panel at the XV<sup>th</sup> Congress of the International  
Association of Buddhist Studies, Atlanta, 23–28 June 2008

Guest editor: David V. Fiordalis

David V. FIORDALIS

*Miracles in Indian Buddhist narratives and doctrine* . . . . . 381

Bradley S. CLOUGH

*The higher knowledges in the Pāli Nikāyas and Vinaya.* . . . . . 409

Kristin SCHEIBLE

*Priming the lamp of dhamma – The Buddha’s miracles in the  
Pāli Mahāvamsa* . . . . . 435

Patrick PRANKE

*On saints and wizards – Ideals of human perfection and  
power in contemporary Burmese Buddhism* . . . . . 453

Rachelle M. SCOTT

*Buddhism, miraculous powers, and gender – Rethinking the  
stories of Theravāda nuns.* . . . . . 489

Luis O. GÓMEZ

*On Buddhist wonders and wonder-working.* . . . . . 513

•

*Notes on the contributors* . . . . . 555