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# On Buddhism, Divination and the Worldly Arts: Textual Evidence from the Theravāda Tradition

David Fiordalis\*

## Introduction

The categories of “Buddhism” and “divination” have not typically been combined in scholarly literature on either Buddhism or divination.<sup>1</sup> More often than not they have been distinguished, giving the misleading impression that there is no such thing as “Buddhist divination.” When acknowledged, it has normally been interpreted as Buddhists engaging in “non-Buddhist” practices or as “indigenous” or “originally” non-Buddhist practices accreting to or entering into structural relations with Buddhism. Such distinctions as these have also informed the analytical repertoires used by scholars to understand the history, culture, and religion of places where Buddhism has flourished, and the apparent disconnect between what some Buddhist texts seem to say and what history and ethnography seem to show. Recently, however, scholars have begun to call for a different approach, one that “focuses on the way

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<sup>1</sup> For example, preliminary research for this article yielded no entries for divination or astrology in Buswell’s 2004 *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*; nor did a cursory perusal of James Lewis’s 1994 *The Astrology Encyclopedia* provide any information on Buddhism. The 1985 first edition of the *Encyclopedia of Religion* contains a general entry on divination by Evan Zuesse, which has some discussion of Chinese divination but little specific discussion of Buddhism. A separate section on Greek and Roman divination was added for the 2005 edition. If one goes back to the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, originally published between 1908 and 1927, one will find a short entry on Buddhist divination, written by Laurence A. Waddell, who naturally focused his discussion almost entirely on divination in Tibetan Buddhism.

in which [Buddhist] practitioners of divination viewed themselves, their divinatory practices, and their reasons for practicing divination.”<sup>2</sup>

Such studies are extremely important, because the distinctions between Buddhism and allegedly “non-Buddhist” practices remain entrenched, having been buttressed by the widespread modernist concern to distinguish religion from magic and magic from science. In this way divination usually becomes a form of magic, and Buddhism oscillates between being either a “pure” form of religion or more like a rational, secular science/philosophy, or both, depending on whom you ask. This situation partly explains the proliferation of scholarly studies of “Buddhist magic.” It has also prompted scholars to call for renewed prioritization of traditional and indigenous categories. For instance, in a footnote on the use of the term magic, Justin McDaniel writes that it would be “helpful to pay close attention to indigenous terms that are often translated as ‘magic’ in English as much as possible when describing non-English-speaking practitioners” (McDaniel 2011: 255). This is important advice, which I will attempt to follow in this essay. Yet the prioritization of indigenous categories runs a risk, if studies that engage such a process become as though hermetically sealed from broader comparative analyses and concerns.

This essay attends to the sticky web of indigenous terminology concerning divination and other so-called “mundane” or “worldly” arts, focusing primarily upon Buddhist canonical texts preserved in Pāli, augmented by references to commentarial and exegetical literature. It asks: How have some Buddhists, as evinced in this canonical and exegetical literature, understood the broader category of “worldly arts,” which includes techniques we call divinatory? Are Buddhists discouraged from engaging with such practices, as has been commonly asserted? If so, then for whom,

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<sup>2</sup> McGuire 2013: 413. McGuire’s article offers the most up-to-date discussion of divination in Chinese Buddhism and includes a helpful bibliography on divination in the Chinese context. The most recent survey of divination in East Asian religions is Guo 2012, which also includes useful theoretical reflection. Other studies that seem generally consistent with the approach McGuire advocates include McDaniel 2011, Brac de la Perrière 2012, and possibly also Phillipson 2007, which attempts to consider the categories of “Theravāda Buddhism” and “divination” together in a sympathetic way.

specifically, are such words of discouragement primarily meant? And why, specifically, are such practices discouraged? Are the penalties for practicing them severe or lenient? Are there any exceptions or instances when practicing worldly arts is tolerated or encouraged? And what might we conclude, more broadly, from the textual evidence? These tricky questions bear particularly upon the complex, legalistic body of Buddhist monastic rules and their interpretation, as well as the interpretation of a few passages from Buddhist canonical literature that are arguably less straightforward than has sometimes been assumed or asserted.

Several of the texts examined here have been used to demonstrate that divinatory practices are not Buddhist, or anyway not “properly” or “originally” Buddhist, and that the Buddha himself discouraged them, and all of this despite the fact that such practices, broadly considered, appear widespread among Buddhists (including Buddhist monks) across various Buddhist traditions of South and Southeast Asia, East Asia, and Tibet.<sup>3</sup> My focus on these texts should not be taken to indicate that I think these texts, canonical or otherwise, should be prioritized over individual practitioners’ beliefs and practices in determining what is properly Buddhist. On the contrary, textual studies require an informed knowledge of historical and contemporary belief and practice, even though contexts vary across time and place, and the lived realities that gave rise to the texts of the past are now largely lost. In addition to historical and ethnographic studies of Buddhist practitioners of divination, however, revisiting classical textual sources and lesser-known commentaries can help us to interrogate and better understand the ostensive connection or lack thereof among Buddhism, divination, and the so-called worldly arts.

Since this essay remains fairly focused upon texts of the so-called Theravāda tradition, I should add the disclaimer that

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<sup>3</sup> For China, see McGuire 2013 and the sources she recommends, as well as Guo 2012. For Southeast Asia, one may profitably consult Brac de la Perrière 2012, Terwiel 2012, and Quartich Wales 1983, in addition to McDaniel 2011. For Tibet, see especially Ekvall 1964 and his citations. On some of the more specific forms of divination practiced in Tibet, see Bacot 1913 on mirror divination, and Laufer 1914 and Mortensen 2003 on crow divination. Mipham 1990 is a translation of a divination manual written in the 19th century by the influential Tibetan Buddhist scholar-monk Jamgon Mipham (‘Jam mgon mi pham). Cornu 1997 is a general survey of Tibetan astrology.

Theravāda ought not be held up as the benchmark for “traditional Buddhism,” as has often been done.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, this misleading identification of Theravāda with traditional Buddhism has contributed to the misleading conclusion that the supposed “proliferation” of divinatory practices in Tibetan or Chinese Buddhism indicates that these traditions are less “traditional” (i.e., more influenced by “Mahāyāna Buddhism,” less rigorous with respect to monastic rules, and so on). While Tibet and China have their own “indigenous” and “Buddhist” traditions of divination and similar practices, and while Buddhist monks of these persuasions have engaged and certainly do engage with them, speaking about their growth or proliferation within Tibetan or Chinese Buddhism implies that Buddhist monks have not always been involved with them. Examining textual evidence in Pāli can help us to evaluate this claim, and the broader contention that Buddhists throughout Asia, be they Tibetan or Thai, Sinhalese or Taiwanese, are necessarily doing something antithetical to Buddhist doctrine, if not practice, when they engage with divination and other so-called “worldly arts.”

### **Defining Divination**

Divination, like the overarching category term, magic, has often been applied in cross-cultural analyses in a rather imprecise manner. If magic has been fairly over-determined, over-theorized, and perhaps also over-criticized, then it seems to me that divination has not yet been defined with sufficient analytical clarity for comparative purposes. Take, for instance, the following definition excerpted from the *Oxford English Dictionary*: “the foretelling of future events or discovery of what is hidden or obscure by supernatural or magical means; soothsaying, augury, prophecy” (Simpson and Weiner 1989: IV. 892). Alternatively, in his article for the *Encyclopedia of Religion*, Evan Zuesse classifies divination into three categories. First, intuitive divination is defined as interpreting an immediate situation through the “spiritual insight” of the diviner. Second is “possession divination” or “spirit manipulation.”

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<sup>4</sup> Here I use the term Theravāda advisedly and simply to cover the range of Buddhist canonical and post-canonical materials written in Pāli, and which form the main focus of this essay. For more on the problematic nature of the very category of Theravāda Buddhism, see Skilling, Carbine, Cicuzza, and Pakdeekham 2012.

Within this category, augury is distinguished from mediumship, spirit or deity possession, in that the former consists in divining messages sent by divinities through non-human creatures or things. Third is “wisdom divination,” which involves interpreting the operation of impersonal laws within a coherent divine order (Zuesse 2005: 2370-2372).

Both these definitions are extremely, if not impossibly, vague. A unifying theme appears to be knowledge and/or power of some sort over affairs of an unspecified nature, but these unspecified affairs might concern the past, present, or future, and the source or technique of knowledge or power is decidedly unclear. It may come from the “spiritual insight” of the diviner, whatever that is, or from another supernatural agent, contacted somehow. It may come from supernatural or magical means, whatever these might be. It may involve interpretation of the operation of impersonal laws within an overarching cosmic order, but precisely how this is different from “scientific” knowledge is not clearly specified.<sup>5</sup>

One might well question whether the OED or the *Encyclopedia of Religion*'s entry on divination, sources that reflect little or no explicit awareness of Buddhism, are useful for understanding divinatory practices in Buddhism. They do provide us with a sense for one of our primary methodological problems, however, which is that we don't know precisely what we mean by divination, making it difficult to identify what kind of practice we aim to classify by the hybrid expression “Buddhist divinatory practices.” They also suggest a second and related problem. While it can and does figure more positively in individual and collective self-definitions, divination, like magic and superstition, often carries strong pejorative connotations of irrationality, abnormality and otherness. Given that divination is a site of contesting valuations, of identity and difference, can it still serve as a value neutral term for comparative analysis, or how can it best serve as a scholarly category for understanding Buddhist doctrine and practice?

In the Pāli Buddhist literature considered here, the primary indigenous terms for divination are *nemmita*, *nemmitika* (or

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<sup>5</sup> See Ekvall 1964: 251–252, where a similar point is made about definitions of divination in general.

*nemmitaka*), and several others that fall under the broader category of *tiraccha-* or (more commonly) *tiracchāna-vijjā*. *Nemmita* occurs most famously in the *Mahāpadāna-sutta* of the *Dīgha-nikāya*, when King Bandhuma calls upon the brahman “diviners” (*nemmitā*, “those skilled in interpreting signs or omens”) to have a look at his son, Prince Vipassī (D, vol. 2: 16). They examine the prince, see the thirty-two marks of greatness on his body, and predict that he will become either a wheel-turning king or a buddha. In another passage, from the *Aṅguttara-nikāya*, the term is used in the context of describing five impediments to rain that escape the eyes of the “forecasters” (*nemmitā*) (A, vol. 3: 243). Despite the fact that the first passage describes what would become an important narrative element in the standard blueprint of a buddha’s life, neither of the passages attributes the term *nemmita* to a Buddhist. However, the second passage implies that the Buddha can discern the causes and particular conditions for rainfall better than do the ostensibly non-Buddhist diviners. Does that make him a diviner himself, the divination expert *par excellence*? As we will see, the answer to this question depends in part on how we choose to engage the term as an analytical category.

### **Divination and the Worldly Arts**

The best-known reference in Buddhist canonical literature to the practice of divination, more broadly considered, occurs in a passage on *sīla* or moral restraint that recurs in each of the discourses that make up the first division of the *Dīgha-nikāya*. In fact, this division is probably named the “Morality Section Division” (*sīlakkhanda vagga*) because of the fact that all the discourses of that division – thirteen in total – contain this same passage with only minor alterations in the wording to reflect the different contexts in which it occurs in each discourse. Though the terms *nemmita* and *nemmitika* also appear in this passage, the key category term found here is *tiracchāna-vijjā*, an expression sometimes rendered broadly as “worldly arts,” though its precise definition and broader connotations are somewhat unclear and require further discussion.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Often translators have opted to render the term with a greater sense of disapprobation than I have done here. Rhys Davids 2002: 14, gives “low arts”; Bodhi 2000: 1019, gives “debased arts”; Walshe 1995: 71, has “base

Before attending to the specific instances of these terms, however, a short description of the whole passage should prove helpful. In brief, it consists of a long list, or rather a list of lists, of various kinds of moral restraint or activities from which one ought to refrain. These moral restraints range from some that are central to Buddhist discussions of moral action, like the lists of five, eight, or ten moral precepts, to some apparently intended more specifically for monastics, to some that are less commonly discussed in Buddhist canonical or post-canonical literature, such the long list of so-called “worldly arts,” which is our focus here. The whole passage is divided into “small” (*culla*), “medium” (*majjhima*), and “large” (*mahā*), and this would seem to refer to the length of the lists contained within each subdivision, since the section titles appear to run contrary to the ethical significance of the lists contained in them. The “small” section contains some of the most basic or general moral restraints; the lists of the middle section appear more specific to “religious specialists” (*samana-brāhmaṇā*), including Buddhist monastics; the “large” section continues the theme by elaborating a very long list of *tiracchānavijjā* or “worldly arts,” nearly one hundred and fifty of them by Richard Gombrich’s count (Gombrich 1997).

In the *Brahmajāla-sutta*, the first *sutta* of the *Dīgha-nikāya*, the Buddha offers the whole passage as a list of activities in which, he claims, “common folk” (*puṭhujjana*), that is, non-Buddhists and “ordinary” Buddhists, praise him for not participating. So, common folk praise him for not harming living beings, for not taking what is not given to him, for not lying, and so forth. These are basic moral restraints found in the small section, towards the end of which the restraints begin to become more focused on the activities of “religious specialists,” ostensibly including Buddhist monastics. The middle section continues this trend, but also begins to elaborate with more prolixity upon, for instance, what specific types of shows the Buddha doesn’t attend or on what types of

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arts”; Horner 2004: 337, gives “worldly knowledge,” but says in a footnote that “animal wisdom” is more literal; Gombrich 1997 goes for the rather more colorful “beastly arts,” though Rhys Davids 1991: 152, had mentioned earlier that the expression “literally” means “brutish, or beastly wisdom”; Langenberg 2014 offers “deviant lore.” Among these translators, only Horner chooses a more neutral option, and yet the Chinese translation of the term, as reflected in Heirman 2002: 761, would seem to support such an interpretation.



comfortable furniture he doesn't sit, "while subsisting on food provided by the faithful" (*saddhā deyyāni bhojanāni bhujjivā*). Thirteen types of entertainment and twenty types of couches are mentioned. In the final sentence of middle section, the Buddha states:

Monks, a common person (*puthujjano*), when praising the Tathāgata, might say, "Whereas some renouncers and brahmans (*samaṇa-brāhmaṇā*), while subsisting on food provided by the faithful, are liars, prattlers, insinulators (*nemmitikā*), and disparagers, covetously pursuing gain upon gain, the ascetic Gotama refrains from such deception and prattle" (D, vol. 1: 8).<sup>7</sup>

Following this sentence begins an extensive list of various types of "worldly arts" (*tiracchāna-vijjā*) in which common folk praise the Buddha for not participating, a motley list that includes quite a few specific practices that we might call divinatory.

The Buddha continues,

Or, monks, the common person, when praising the Tathāgata, might say, "Whereas some renouncers and brahmans, while subsisting on food provided by the faithful, make a living through wrong means of livelihood, through worldly arts (*tiracchāna-vijjāya*) such as the following: [the science of the] body (*aṅga-[sattham]*), [science of] signs (*nimitta-[sattham]*),<sup>8</sup> portents (*uppāta*), dreams (*supina*), physical marks (*lakkaṇa*), the gnawings of mice (*mūsikacchina*), fire sacrifices (*aggi-homa*), [fire] sacrifices with a ladle (*dabbi-homa*), [fire] sacrifices with rice husks, [fire] sacrifices with rice powder, [fire] sacrifices with grains of rice, [fire] sacrifices with butter, [fire] sacrifices with ghee, [fire] sacrifices with the mouth, [fire] sacrifices with blood; physiognomy (*aṅga-vijjā*), geomancy (*vatthu-vijjā*),

<sup>7</sup> Note the translation of the term *nemittikā* here. Rhys Davids translated the term as "diviner" (Rhys Davids 2002: 14). While the term does sometimes mean diviner, here it probably means "hinting" or "insinuation," as it commonly does when it appears in this particular list of terms. See Cone 2013: 641.

<sup>8</sup> D, vol. 1: 9. The words given in brackets have been supplied from the commentary (DA, vol. 1: 92), because many of these terms are rare and difficult to interpret without the help of the commentary.

geomancy (*khatta-vijjā*)<sup>9</sup>, skill with charms (*siva-vijjā*), skill with ghosts (*bhūta-vijjā*), skill with creatures living in the ground (*bhūri-vijjā*), skill with snakes (*ahi-vijjā*), skill with poison (*visa-vijjā*), skill with scorpions (*vicchika-vijjā*), mice augury (*mūsika-vijjā*), bird augury (*sakuna-vijjā*), crow augury (*vāyasa-vijjā*), knowing a person's lifespan (*pakka-jjhāna*), protection against arrows (*sara-parittāna*), and [knowing the] animal world (*miga-cakka*)<sup>10</sup>—the ascetic Gotama refrains from such worldly arts as these.”

The above translation includes only the first of seven paragraphs listing various types of *tiracchāna-vijjā*.<sup>11</sup> Already we begin to see the motley nature of the category, while subsequent paragraphs elaborate further on such practices as gemology, animal husbandry, geomancy, physiognomy, astronomy, astrology, forecasting the weather, predicting natural disasters, predicting current and future successes in battle or business, arranging auspicious times for marriages, mirror divination, spirit possession, sorcery, poetry, accounting, metaphysical speculation or “worldly knowledge” (*lokāyata*), and many types of medical practice, including prescribing emetics, purgatives and ointments, as well as practicing surgery and pediatrics. Upon surveying this long list of *tiracchāna-vijjā*, we are immediately confronted with a problem not dissimilar from the one we face in defining divination: the daunting breadth and heterogeneity of the category.

Also apparently obvious is the extent to which the passage tries to emphasize that the Buddha does not engage with such practices, that they are not appropriately “Buddhist.” When faced with such a broad condemnation, one might ask: Are the practices themselves problematic, or is the primary object of criticism the covetous intent behind the practices, make a living from such practices while subsisting on food provided by the faithful? Or are both problematic? Or does something else lie behind the apparent criticism of these practices? Who shouldn't engage with them?

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<sup>9</sup> The commentary suggests that the difference between these two types of geomancy is that the former concerns houses while the latter concerns fields and plots of land.

<sup>10</sup> The commentary suggests that this refers specifically to recognizing animals based on the sounds they make.

<sup>11</sup> The list of *tiracchāna-vijjā* continues from page 9 to the middle of page 12, while the commentary on the list runs from pages 92 to 98.

These are important questions, but before attending to them, we ought first to see whether we can gain any further clarity on the meaning and nature of the practices generally classified as *tiracchāna-vijjā*, especially if we wish to understand whether and how some Buddhists conceptualized “divination.”

Another canonical passage, from the *Samyutta-nikāya*, offers a narrower range of practices representative of *tiracchāna-vijjā*. It tells the story of an encounter between one of the Buddha’s foremost disciples, Sāriputta, and a non-Buddhist, female ascetic name Sucimukhī. She approaches Sāriputta and asks whether he eats facing downwards, upwards, or in any of the ten directions. Sāriputta says that he does not. So, Sucimukhī asks him how he does eat? In his response, Sāriputta humorously correlates eating downwards, upwards, and facing the four intermediate directions with “religious specialists” who “make their living by wrong means of livelihood,” namely, by the “worldly arts” (*tiracchāna-vijjā*) of “geomancy” (*vatthu-vijjā*), “astrology” (*nakkhatta*), and “physiognomy” (*aṅga-vijjā*), respectively. He equates those who eat facing the four quarters of north, south, east and west with those who make their living by the wrong means of livelihood of running long errands and working as a messenger. “Sister,” says Sāriputta by contrast, “I seek alms correctly (*dhammika*, that is, according to the Dhamma), and having sought it, I eat my alms correctly.” Sucimukhī then goes throughout the city proclaiming that the followers of the Buddha eat “correct” (*dhammika*) and “blameless” (*anavajja*) food, and urges people to give food to the followers of the Buddha.<sup>12</sup>

### Worldly Arts, Worldly Talk, and Wrong Means of Livelihood

In the examples above, the “worldly arts” are subsumed under the broader notion of “wrong means of livelihood” (*micchājīva*) and more specifically concern the way in which

<sup>12</sup> S, vol. 3: 238–240. Much of this discourse is also cited in the encyclopedic compendium of Buddhist doctrine sometimes called the *Mahāprajñā-pāramitā-śāstra*, which was partially translated from Chinese and extensively annotated by Etienne Lamotte (1981: 199–202). McBride 2005 (especially pp. 94–95, and footnote 30) also cites this passage, but reads it as affirming straightforwardly that Buddhist monks practice divination. McBride’s interpretation appears to disagree with both the Pāli text and Lamotte’s translation of the Chinese.

“religious specialists,” including Buddhist monks, “make their living” (*jīvikamkappenti*). As a passage in the commentary on the *Sucimukhī-sutta* (SA, vol. 2: 247) discussing geomancy makes clear:

“They earn a living by wrong means of livelihood” means that they earn a living by precisely such wrong means of livelihood considered to be the worldly art of geomancy. They live subsisting off the provisions given by people pleased by the preparing of those sites. That is the meaning.

A canonical passage from the *Cullaniddesa* (Cn 258) makes this connection even more explicit by contrasting people who acquire and consume things blamelessly and those who do so in a blameworthy fashion:

Concerning “those who do not accumulate [possessions] and enjoy [things, particularly food and clothing] blamelessly,” there is the person who enjoys [things] in a blameless fashion and there is the person who enjoys [things] in a blameless fashion. And what type is the person who enjoys [things] in a blameworthy fashion? Here, such a person makes a living through deceit, prattle, insinuation (*nemittika*), and disparagement, covetously pursuing gain upon gain. [He makes a living by] offerings (*dāna*) of wood, offerings of bamboo, offerings of leaves (*patta*), offerings of flowers, offerings of fruits, offerings of baths, offerings of soft powders (*cunṇa*), offerings of coarse powders (*maṭṭikā*), offerings of toothbrushes (*dantakaṭṭha*), and offerings of rinse-water for the mouth (*mukhodaka*). [He makes a living] through bribery with bean-soup (*muggasūpyatā*, though bean-soup-ness?), with nourishment (*pāribhatṭyatā*), and with a soft seat (*pīṭhamaddikatāya*). [He makes a living] through geomancy, worldly arts (*tiracchānavijjā*), physiognomy, and astrology. [He makes a living] through running long errands, being a messenger, being a walking gofer (*jaṅghapesaniya*). [He makes a living] through practicing medicine (*vejjakamma*), making repairs (*navakamma*), serving out alms, and administering offerings. He makes a living, having obtained, acquired, achieved, and gained goods by [such] incorrect (*adhamma*), improper (*visama*) [means]. Such a person is called one who enjoys [things] in a blameworthy fashion.

In the passage cited above, a number of different activities come together under the general category of wrong means of livelihood, including some activities we have already seen and

some we have not. Interestingly and unusually, “worldly arts” (*tiracchānavijjā*) appears here as an individual member of a subset of four terms that also includes geomancy, physiognomy, and astrology. In the later commentary on the parallel passage in the *Mahāniddeśa* (MnA, vol 2: 401), we find these four terms explained further:

In respect to “not by geomancy” and so forth, the science of knowing whether a village, a market town, a house, and so forth is well positioned or ill positioned is called geomancy. An art that does not lead one out (*aniyyānikattā*) [of the cycle of rebirth], [and] that runs crosswise/horizontal to the paths [leading to] heaven or liberation (*saggamokkhamaggānam tiracchāna bhūtā*), such as the science of physiognomy (*aṅgasattha*), omens (*nimitta*), and so forth [and] the remaining arts (*avasesa vijjā*), is called a worldly art (*tiracchāna vijjā*). Knowing whether a man or woman is lucky or unlucky by the marks on the body is called physiognomy. The science of knowing connections with the stars is called astrology.

Here the commentary apparently attempts to weave together information drawn from the morality section and the *Sucimukhī-sūta* to normalize and explain the unusual set of four. At the same time it includes a gloss on the term *tiracchāna-vijjā* similar to one we find in several other places in the commentaries that explain the expression “worldly talk” (*tiracchāna-kathā*): that such talk does not lead to liberation, but rather runs crosswise to attaining it or heavenly rebirth (DA, vol. 1: 88).

K. R. Norman, who has treated this expression in one of his lexicographical studies, suggests that this explanation has all the trappings of a folk etymology. Although the term *tiracchāna* (possibly for *tiraścina* in Sanskrit, as derived from *tiryac* or *tiryāñc*) literally means oblique, transverse, horizontal, sideways, or awry—Edgerton (1953: 253) suggests that related *tiras* may also mean “outside”—the term commonly refers to animals of all sorts, as they generally move horizontally across the earth. Being limited to relatively few instances in the canonical and commentarial literature, however, *tiracchāna-vijjā* and *tiracchāna-kathā* look like idiomatic expressions. The latter appears to refer to everyday or idle topics of conversation. The standard list from the morality section enumerates such topics:

Talk of kings, thieves, great ministers, armies, fears, battles, food, drink, clothing, beds, garlands, perfumes, relatives, vehicles, villages, small towns, cities, countries, women, alcohol, streets, wells, those who have died, diverse topics, speculation about the world, speculation about the ocean, and about becoming or not becoming this or that.<sup>13</sup>

Norman points out that the same list is enumerated elsewhere in the canon, but called “village talk” (*gāma-kathā*), and described as “worthless” (*hīnā*), “associated with the village” (*gammā*), “common” (*pothujjanikā*), “ignoble” (*anariyā*) and “unconnected with the goal” (*anattasamhitā*), that is, liberation.<sup>14</sup> In a somewhat similar manner, the commentary on the nuns monastic code glosses the term *tiracchāna-vijjā* as “foreign” (*bāhirakam*) and “unconnected with the goal” (*anattasamhitā*).<sup>15</sup>

These passages suggest broader and somewhat more vague notions about what precisely constitutes *tiracchāna-vijjā*, apart from the fact that such practices seem clearly defined as non-Buddhist or at least not appropriately Buddhist. The *Dvemātikāpāḷi*, a later Burmese compilation of monastic rules and commentary upon them, seems to confirm this impression, while further muddying the water on the precise nature and scope of *tiracchāna vijjā*:

[The expression] mundane art [refers to] whatever art that is foreign (*bāhiraka*), does not achieve the goal [of Buddhism] (*anattasamhita*), [and] is used to harm others (*parūpaghātakara*), particularly [such arts as] training in elephants (*hatthi*), horses (*assa*), and chariots (*ratha*), training in swordsmanship and archery (*dhanutharusippa*), and use of mantras (*manta*) and tonics (*agada*), such as those from the *Atharva Veda* (*āthabbaṇa*), to harden (*khilana*) others [that is, to kill them], to gain mastery over others

<sup>13</sup> D, vol. 1: 8–9. The translation mostly follows Rhys Davids 2002: 13–14. No animals are specifically mentioned, nor are these topics animals are likely discuss with one another, except perhaps in the *Pañcatantra*. For his part, Norman suggests that the list once did include a reference to animals, which has since dropped out. See Norman 1993: 156.

<sup>14</sup> M, vol. 3: 113. See Norman 1993: 155.

<sup>15</sup> V, vol. 4: 305. See Horner 2004: 337.

(*vasīkaraṇa*), and to dry out (*sosāpana*) others' bodies [that is, to mummify them?], and the rest.<sup>16</sup>

Here we see specific mention of the condition that such practices have the purpose of doing harm to others. Thus, certain types of basic training in warfare are highlighted alongside a variety of practices that we might consider “magic” of a particularly sinister variety. Note the absence here of many of the basic divinatory practices emphasized in preceding citations. Instead, the passage seems to emphasize not only a certain array of practices, but also the intent to harm.

Another passage, from the *Khuddasikkhā* and *Mūlasikkhā*—monastic manuals that Charles Hallisey (1990: 207) has explained as being written to “provide even more practical guidance”—describes *tīracchāna-vijjā* as follows:

[Activities] that increase desire, hatred and confusion (*rāgadosamoha-vaḍḍhāni*), [activities] condemned by the Buddha and the rest (*buddhādi-garahitā*), [activities] moving, going, proceeding crossways (*tīro*), or horizontally (*tīriyato*) to heaven and liberation, [such as] poetry, dance and so forth (*kabbanāṭakādikā*), all those fields of knowledge (*sabbāpi vijjā*), or it should be known to be comprised of what is verily not in accordance with the discipline (*vinayayuttitopi*), having ascertained the practice of the discipline by what goes along [with it] and what important [rules] should be upheld (KM, 399).

In addition to elaborations upon the folk etymology, this passage emphasizes the Buddha's condemnation of such activities, perhaps making oblique reference to the morality section of the *Dīgha-nikāya*, and provides the added idea that such practices actually increase the root afflictions. Again, the focus is on certain practices, but also upon intent, and the relationship between action and intent. After mentioning poetry and dance as particular types of such activities, the passage concludes with a seemingly more general statement that the worldly arts comprise whatever activities are deemed not to accord with the monastic discipline!

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16 Dm, 334. This same passage is also found in the *Vinayavinicchaya-Ṭikā* (VvṬ, vol. 2: 98).

### Should Monks and Nuns Practice Worldly Arts?

These last two examples come from compendia of and exegetical works upon the section of the Buddhist canonical literature that most directly concerns the regulations governing the behavior of Buddhist monks and nuns. The canonical and commentarial literature on the monastic code also contains two instances in which the practice of “worldly arts” is specifically mentioned. One is the fifth section of the *Cullavagga*, a miscellaneous section on what are called “minor matters” concerning the behavior of monks.<sup>17</sup> The second is the nuns’ monastic code or *pātimokkha* itself, in a section on minor infractions (*pācittiya*) requiring confession.<sup>18</sup> This may be a significant point: Whereas the nuns’ code does contain an explicit rule prohibiting the practice of “worldly arts,” the monks’ code does not, the discussion in the *Cullavagga* notwithstanding.<sup>19</sup>

The passage in question in the nuns’ section of the *Vinaya* begins:

At that time, the Blessed One was staying in Sāvattihī in the Jeta Grove in the forest retreat of Anāthapiṇḍika. At that same time, the group of six nuns learned the worldly arts. People complained, criticized and denounced them, saying “Why, indeed, are nuns mastering the worldly arts, just as though they were householders enjoying [material] pleasures!”

The Buddha comes to learn about the criticism and makes a rule prohibiting nuns from mastering the worldly arts. A second

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<sup>17</sup> V, vol. 2: 138. See Horner 2001: 194–195.

<sup>18</sup> V, vol. 4: 305–306. See Horner 2004: 337ff.

<sup>19</sup> This might be what Gombrich has in mind when he describes the prohibition on monks “taking an interest” in “such matters” as astrology as a “principle” and “not a formal rule.” See Gombrich 1988: 205. Though her main focus is more specifically on the healing arts, Amy Langenberg has recently speculated on the possible reasons for what she perceives as a “disproportionate focus on nuns” in these and related prohibitions in Buddhist *Vinaya* collections. See Langenberg 2014. Incidentally, the monks’ code does seem to have an explicit rule pertaining to the practice of *tiracchāna-kathā*. See V, vol. 4: 165, and vol. 1: 188ff. However, Norman notes that the passage does not specifically prohibit *tiracchāna-kathā*, but rather monks entering the village at the wrong time. See Norman 1993: 155–156, and Horner 2004: 82, especially footnote 3.



rule closely follows this one, focusing on nuns teaching the worldly arts to others. A brief commentarial paragraph lists certain exceptions to these rules: “It isn’t a fault, if she masters ‘writing’ (*lekha*), ‘mneumonics’ (*dhāraṇa*), ‘protective utterances’ (*paritta*) for the purposes of protection, if she is crazy (*ummattikā*), or if she is a first-time offender.”<sup>20</sup> These exceptions aside, the passages offer no specific definition of the “worldly arts.” However, the language of the criticism leveled against the nuns seems to echo other passages and suggests that making a living or earning material benefit from the practice of the worldly arts is the main problem.

Thus, the question becomes whether the practices themselves are improper for some reason, or if the attitude or intent behind them is more important. I tend to agree with Gombrich (1997: 175) when he writes: “The main point is that it is wrong to make a living out of these practices, to do them for profit.” This seems to place the emphasis on the intent behind the practice.<sup>21</sup> There seems to be a close connection drawn between monks and nuns practicing the worldly arts, making a living by wrong means of livelihood, and acquiring material possessions. While there may be something objectionable about the practices themselves, the broad scope of what might legitimately be included in the category of the worldly arts, combined with a relative lack of serious punishment for practicing them, suggests that the censure may be largely rhetorical in nature. Again, citing Gombrich (1988: 205), “a breach of this principle [that monks take no interest in the worldly arts]...was no doubt a common and trivial occurrence.”

Rhetoric can still become reality, as attested by the Kalyāni inscriptions erected by King Dhammaceti in 1476. The inscriptions testify to one of the purification reforms of the Buddhist monastic institution undertaken periodically by Burmese kings. In this case, the inscriptions mention practicing the worldly arts, such as the

<sup>20</sup> V, vol. 4: 306. The passages in the *Cullavagga* are virtually identical, apart from the gender, though they are shorter, without commentary, and the offense is deemed less serious, a *dukkata* rather than a *pācittiya*.

<sup>21</sup> I would further suggest that this line of reasoning seems largely consistent with John Strong’s recent reinterpretation of the rule prohibiting monks and nuns from displaying superhuman powers in front of laypeople, a rule found in the same section on miscellaneous minor offences in the Pāli *Vinaya*. V, vol. 2: 110–112, and Strong 2012.

medical arts, carpentry, arithmetic, and so on, as one of the reasons for “sinful” monks being expelled from the monastic institution during the reform, a punishment well out of proportion with the monastic code (Taw 1892: 99–100). Yet, one would be hard-pressed, I think, to conclude from such rhetoric that the apparently widespread practice of the worldly arts among Buddhist monks at the time was truly the motivating reason behind the monastic reform.

### **Buddhist Divination?**

In spite of an apparent trend towards vagueness and rhetoric in defining the overall class of so-called “worldly arts,” some scholars have found descriptive historical value in the long lists of fairly specific, if obscure, practices that we find proscribed in the morality section. For instance, David Pingree, the leading authority on ancient Near Eastern and Indian astrological systems, published a short essay that drew attention to similarities between the *Dīgha-nikāya* and some Mesopotamian omen manuals. The similarities he saw occur both in the basic terminology and in the specific ordering of the terms in the list. He thus hypothesized that Mesopotamian omen manuals had a direct influence on Indian systems of divination. He surmised that this contact was facilitated by the spread of the Achaemenid Empire into Northwest India and the Indus Valley.<sup>22</sup> Whether or not Pingree’s hypotheses are correct, the evidence indicates that such practices were associated with at least some members of a generic class of “religious specialists” in ancient India, a class that generally included the Buddha and Buddhist monks and nuns. Perhaps the evidence even suggests the commonality or popularity of such practices among Buddhists. As Richard Gombrich (1997: 174) puts it: “As so often, we find out most about what people were up to, or might have been up to, from texts telling them what they were not allowed to be up to.” Yet, one wonders how much closer we are to an understanding of the specific nature of the practices intended by the terms, and their significance, that is, why Buddhists might wish to learn or practice them and why other Buddhists may have thought them objectionable for the Buddhist monk or nun.

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<sup>22</sup> Pingree 1992: 375–379. See also Knudsen 2008. For a general survey of Indian systems of divination, see Esnoul 1968.

The distancing or “othering” effect we see in these passages, which works to distinguish the attitudes and activities of the proper Buddhist monastic from those of a similar class of “others,” results in a blanket characterization of what appear to be many different kinds of activity under a common, general category. In this way, one might perceive an interesting parallel with modern western definitions of divination. In the modern case, however, the distinction has been drawn not only between religion and magic, but also between magic and science. Does the same set of distinctions also hold in the case of our Buddhist examples? Is the PTS dictionary accurate, for instance, when it glosses *tīracchāna-vijjā* as “pseudo-science”? (Rhys Davids and Stede 1921–1925: 303). For this to be so, I would argue, these Buddhist texts would have had to distinguish not only between religion and magic in a more traditional sense, but also between magic and science in a more modern sense. In other words, one would need to see doubt clearly expressed about the practical, this-worldly efficacy of such practices, and not simply doubt about their efficacy for the purposes of achieving liberation. It is true that Gombrich has sensed skepticism about the efficaciousness of the practices in the fact that the passage in the morality section says that the food is “given in faith.”<sup>23</sup> Yet, I can see no clear distinction made there or elsewhere between good and bad science or between efficacious and inefficacious mundane technologies. Therefore, if a sense of “magic” does remain about the category of *tīracchāna-vijjā*, it seems the more classical sense of magic drawn in contrast to true religion: magic seen as mundane technique or skill with utilitarian purpose and possibly even malevolent intent.

This contrast may become clearer when we consider two additional passages from Buddhist canonical literature. Both passages feature the Buddha performing “divinations” (in a broad, neutral sense of the term) through the use of his special powers, particularly his knowledge of the arising and passing away of living beings, or what is sometimes called the “divine eye” (*dibbacakkhu*). Even though it is often classified as “worldly”

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<sup>23</sup> Gombrich 1997: 174. In an earlier publication, however, Gombrich writes: “...the Buddha himself condemned astrology, palmistry and all similar practices, though his condemnation was specifically directed against their practice by monks: he did not deny their possible validity, but declared them a distraction from the road to salvation.” See Gombrich 1971: 148–149.

(*lokiya*), the divine eye is not normally classified as a “worldly art” (*tiracchāna-vijjā*). Instead, it features as one of several powers that stand at the heart of certain canonical articulations of Buddhist awakening and the liberating knowledge and power entailed by it.<sup>24</sup> The Buddha’s knowledge of the arising and passing away of living beings appears to justify in an epistemological sense the enormous genre of Buddhist narrative literature known as *apadāna* or *avadāna*, stories in which the Buddha repeatedly and without hesitation “divines” the karmic connections among past, present, and future actions and circumstances. In this way, the notion of the divine eye or knowledge of the arising and passing away of beings nicely captures what Robert Ekvall (1964: 253–254) calls the spatial and temporal dimensions of divination.

There are many instances in Buddhist canonical literature in which the Buddha uses his divine eye. Both passages I want to consider come from the second section of the *Dīgha-nikāya*. One is the *Janavasabha-sutta*, and the other is found in the well-known *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta*, which tells of the Buddha’s final days before passing into *nirvāṇa*.<sup>25</sup> Both passages relate certain happenings at the “Brick Hall” (*giṇṇjakāvasatha*) at Nādikā. The *Janavasabha-sutta* begins by describing an instance in which the Buddha is “foretelling (*byākaroti*) the rebirths of his followers up and down the countryside whose time had come and had recently died” (D, vol. 2: 200). News of the Buddha’s words spreads around the community to the great delight and amazement of his followers. Ānanda then hears the news and wonders why the Buddha has not explained any of the rebirths of his devotees in other countries like Magadha, where people like the famous King Bimbisāra had lived and died. After Ānanda asks him about this apparent oversight and he mulls it over in his mind, the Buddha sits down and resolves, “I shall know their place (*gati*) and condition of rebirth (*abhisamparāya*),” and he does so. The Buddha then proceeds to inform Ānanda, and Ānanda informs others, and thus the Buddha’s message spreads widely among the populace. In this discourse, no criticism is made of the Buddha’s practice, nor is any suggestion made that the Buddha doesn’t engage in such matters. It seems a perfectly normal thing for him to do.

<sup>24</sup> For an overview of these concepts in Pāli canonical literature, see Clough 2010.

<sup>25</sup> The former is found at D, vol. 2: 200–219, and the latter at D, vol. 2: 91–94.

The *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta* tells another episode of the Buddha performing divination. During his final tour about the country, the Buddha again visits the Brick Hall at Nādikā, and perhaps in an allusion to the *Janavasabha-sutta*, Ānanda asks the Buddha to divine the fates of several Buddhists who have died there. The Buddha begins to do so, but soon grows weary of divining the fates of each and every person; he is, after all, nearing the end of his life. He proceeds to teach Ānanda a method he calls the “Mirror of Dharma” (*dhamma-ādāsa*). This method turns out simply to be faith in the Buddha, his teachings, and community, but by means of it, the Buddha claims, the Buddhist devotee may discern his own fate. The phrase *dhamma-ādāsa* evokes an expression found in the long list of “worldly arts,” namely *ādāsa-pañha* or “mirror divination,” literally “questions by means of a mirror.”

Despite certain differences, both these passages depict the Buddha as agreeing without apparent hesitation to perform what one may well wish to call “divinations,” though in a way that upholds the Buddhist Dharma and relies upon particular categories the tradition deemed central to it. In this way, one may perceive the problem with limiting our understanding of divination in Buddhism to the so-called “worldly arts.” By doing so, one unwittingly highlights certain passages that seem to deny, almost by definition, the very existence of Buddhist divination. Consequently, one may well overlook evidence like the *Janavasabha-sutta* or the *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta*, or if one does take such evidence into account, then one interprets it as describing something other than divination. Alternatively, one might account for the difference by placing greater emphasis on the intentions behind the actions rather than the actions themselves. In either case, the concept of divination appears as a site for contesting valuations, of identity and difference, posing a problem for those who would apply a single, value neutral concept of divination to a matrix of terms that exist in a state of tension.

### **"Worldly" and "Otherworldly"**

This same tension is expressed within Buddhist discourse by the distinction between so-called “this-worldly” (*lokiya*, *lokika*) and “otherworldly” (*lokuttara*) orientations or values. This distinction must be among the indigenous Buddhist scholastic

classifications to have been employed most commonly in modern analyses of Buddhism. It has often been used to distinguish Buddhist from non-Buddhist, and to supply the Buddhist “equivalent” of the distinction between the religious and the secular or the sacred and profane.<sup>26</sup> More recently it has come under criticism for failing to encapsulate the complexity of Buddhism on the ground. After briefly discussing the *lokiya/lokuttara* opposition and its commonplace application to Theravāda Buddhism, not only by scholars but by educated, modern Thai Buddhists influenced by modern scholarly representations of Buddhism, Justin McDaniel (2011: 115) concludes: “The *lokiya/lokuttara* [sic] distinction is not very useful in describing Thai monastic life.” “Many Thai monks are multitaskers,” he explains, but he goes further. If we remove the mundane from the supramundane, if we associate the worldly with magic and characterize it as non-Buddhist, McDaniel argues, then this effectively removes agency from thousands of practicing Thai Buddhists and makes their everyday concerns and activities something tangential to Thai Buddhist life.

While I substantially agree with McDaniel’s point, I do not think the *lokiya/lokuttara* distinction is itself the problem. Rather, the way it has often been utilized has not helped to show how closely the practices and beliefs designated by these terms are intertwined in many Buddhist understandings. The distinction has less commonly been perceived as embodying an internal tension within Buddhism, which is the line of interpretation I want to pursue here. For support, I want to draw upon several passages that deploy the *lokiya/lokuttara* distinction.

In the *Milindapañha*, for instance, King Milinda asks how the Buddha could have had previous teachers, yet still say that he has no teacher, no equal, no rival in the world of gods and men. The Buddhist monk Nāgasena explains that the Buddha’s previous teachers, including the eight specialists who interpreted the marks upon his body at birth, the Brahmin expert in the Vedic sciences who taught him as a boy, the god who inspired him to renounce the world, and his first two meditation teachers who taught him while he was still practicing asceticism were all “his teachers in regard to

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<sup>26</sup> See, for instance, Ames 1964, Spiro 1975, Tambiah 1970, and Gombrich 1971 and 1997.

the dharma (teaching, reality) of the world” (*ācariye lokiye dhamme*). “Yet, in regard to this dharma that is preeminent in the world (*imasmin ca lokuttare dhamme*),” Nāgasena continues, “there is no teacher surpassing the Tathāgata (*natthi tathāgatassa anuttaro anusāsako*) who could have led him to comprehend the knowledge of the all-knowing ones” (*sabbaññuta ñāṇa paṭivedhāya*) (Mp 236). In this way, Nāgasena resolves the apparent inconsistency, and emphasizes the preeminence of the Buddha and his insight over other forms of “worldly” knowledge. He does not deny that the Buddha had worldly teachers or possessed worldly knowledge.

The way I have translated *lokuttara* here might seem controversial, but I am emboldened to do so in part by a comment that Justin McDaniel makes in a footnote: “[John] Holt noted in his 2004 keynote address at the Exploring Theravada conference at the National University of Singapore that *lokuttara* is often mistranslated and should be read as ‘pre-eminent in this world,’ not as ‘otherworldly’ or ‘non-worldly.’”<sup>27</sup> I agree with Holt, but would add that *lokuttara* can suggest both meanings, otherworldly and preeminent in this world, simultaneously. The Buddha and his teachings and activities are *lokuttara* in both senses of the term in that what is reckoned preeminent in the world is also what leads to the highest goal of liberation from the world. Accordingly, for the Buddhist apologist, only the Buddhist path would lead to this goal, for it is the one based on the Buddha’s authentic, liberating insight. In similar fashion, a Buddha’s awakening is commonly described as *anuttara*, “unexcelled.” Thus, *lokuttara* may be shorthand for “Buddhist,” but only in a particular rhetorical or ideological sense.

By extension, *lokiya*, “this-worldly,” would not necessarily mean “non-Buddhist,” but not *exclusively* Buddhist, that is, shared among many traditions.<sup>28</sup> Insofar as the Buddha also possesses such an array of “worldly” knowledge and powers, another implication is that these are techniques with which the Buddha engages the world out of compassion. One finds a noteworthy example of this usage in the Pāli commentaries, where the Buddha’s “teaching

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<sup>27</sup> McDaniel 2011: 255, note 98.

<sup>28</sup> David Seyfort Rugg has pursued this line of reasoning in several publications, though not without criticism. See Seyfort Rugg 1964, 2001, and 2008.

knowledge” (*desanā-ñāṇa*) is called “worldly” (*lokiya*) and is said to “arise from compassion” (*karuṇā-pabhāvitam*), in contrast to the Buddha’s “penetrating knowledge” (*paṭivedha-ñāṇa*), which is called “supramundane” (*lokuttara*) and is said to “arise from insight” (*paññā-pabhāvitam*). Interestingly, however, both these forms of knowledge are said to be “unique to Buddhas” (*buddhānamyevaorasam*) and “not shared with others” (*aññehiasādhāraṇam*).<sup>29</sup>

These latter passages do not directly concern the so-called “worldly arts” (*tiracchāna-vijjā*), practices that the passages discussed earlier generally seem to consider foreign to Buddhism and not oriented towards the goal of the Buddhist path. Instead, the commentary here explains that the Buddha might engage the world out of compassion through the use of knowledge and powers that the tradition generally considers central to Buddhism. However, the passages do suggest one way in which a Buddhist practitioner of divination might explain how divinatory practices could resonate with Buddhist soteriological values. Garry Phillipson (2007) begins to suggest other ways in which divinatory practices might be so conceived. Moreover, H. G. Quartich Wales, in his study of divination in modern Thailand, informs us that Buddhist monks specializing in it, including respected abbots of monasteries, model their behavior on that of Moggallāna (Quartich Wales 1983: ix). Among the Buddha’s foremost disciples, he is the monk most renowned for his superhuman powers. Thus, although the so-called “super knowledges” (*abhiññā*) and “worldly arts” (*tiracchāna vijjā*) seem mutually exclusive categories at first glance, perhaps Buddhist practitioners of divination and other worldly arts perceive a stronger connection between them. Certainly, they both seek to straddle the tension in Buddhism between this-worldly and otherworldly values and orientations in a productive fashion.

## Conclusion

The questions of the place of divination and the so-called “worldly arts” in Buddhist doctrine, and whether Buddhist monks and nuns ought to engage in such practices, and if not, then why not, all appear less obvious than many scholars have previously

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<sup>29</sup> See Endo 1997: 81, and the several primary sources he cites there.



thought. The category of “worldly arts” seems rather vague in itself, and the formal and less formal prohibitions against their practice by Buddhist monks and nuns are arguably unclear with respect to what precisely the main problem is: the practices themselves, whatever they might be; making a living from such practices; or the intention behind the practices. Moreover, certain other practices or techniques that an outside observer might well consider divinatory, but that the tradition calls by different names and, for one reason or another, appears to consider properly Buddhist, are not condemned and are even encouraged.

This hermeneutical situation should prompt a broader consideration of how we conceive and apply analytical categories in the study of Buddhism. Rather than critically considering the meanings of terms and the contexts for their usage in traditional Buddhist discourses, certain concepts have been taken to provide indigenous structural oppositions that could be exploited in order to draw analytical contrasts between religion and magic and between magic and science. This reflects a common concern found in numerous strands of intellectual and everyday discourse in modern times. I do not wish to separate “Buddhism” too much from “us,” for indeed the central theoretical standpoint of this essay has been that it is both necessary and useful to consider them together. However, we need to be careful about seeing Buddhism through the prism of our own preconceived analytical structures. Given the subtleties and differences of context, we also must remain cautious about reproducing Buddhist rhetorical self-understandings, and using them as guiding principles in our academic studies of Buddhism without critical reflection on the particular circumstances in which such particular understandings are generated and diffused.

When seen in the light of our comparative analysis, neither the rational/irrational dichotomy nor that between science and pseudo-science—distinguishing which has been such a strong modern concern even among apologists for the category of religion—seems to be clearly reflected in the classical Buddhist literature we have examined in this essay. Nevertheless, on the interpretation offered here, Buddhist literature depicts Buddhists as being very much engaged in the affairs of this world, and the supposedly “otherworldly” rhetoric reflects and can even be made to justify this engagement. Therefore, perhaps the question we

should be asking isn't so much where forms of divination practiced by Buddhists originated, or whether they are "Buddhist" or "non-Buddhist," or whether Buddhist monastics should or should not be practicing them. There seems to be ample evidence that they do, and probably always have, despite the ambivalences in the tradition towards doing so. Instead, echoing McGuire, I would argue that we should be attending more carefully to what it means that Buddhist monastics practice divination, how those who do perform divinations understand what they are doing, and how we might better understand Buddhism and ourselves in light of this fact.

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