Stories of the Buddha’s miracles certainly function as narrative hooks for an engaged audience, and serve as reminders of his potent presence. But I read the Buddha’s miracle stories, or at least those that occur at the outset of the fifth century Pāli Mahāvamsa, as more than signs of his aptitude and authority. I argue that they function on a deeper level than strategic literary exemplification of the persuasiveness of the Buddha to convert. The Buddha’s miracles serve to engender particular emotional responses that in turn incite ethical transformation.

There has been a lot of scholarly interest of late in relics and images, and how they function to compel individuals to perceive a productive proximity to the Buddha even in his absence. Just as the efficacy of Buddha images is not ascribed to human agency, so, too, the narratives of the Buddha’s miracles perform work that transcends mere didacticism or representation of the miraculous nature of the Buddha. Robert Brown suggests, “With their wondrous size and priceless material, [Buddha images] appear not so much as artistic or archaeological facts, but rather as part of a miraculous epistemology, a way of knowing through the miraculous.”¹ I assert that this miraculous epistemology is fundamentally operative in Pāli narrative literature, whether it is evident in how the environment responds to the Buddha through earthquakes, garlands and perfume, or how animals are moved to serve the Buddha; or how items of use behave bizarrely, such as bowls moving upstream; or at times when the Buddha himself is performing a miracle, straight-


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up and unmediated. In other words, the miracles employed in Pāli texts aren’t simply another clever narrative device to hook a reader’s attention; they work upon that reader. Miracle stories in fact reflect the power they portray within the text in the work they do outside the text. A reader sufficiently prepared to expect miracles is worked upon, or primed, for the dhamma, much in the way the characters within the stories are terrified, subdued, awed, transformed, calmed, convinced, converted, and compelled to achieve higher spiritual stations by their exposure to the Buddha’s miracles. Much as a soaking in good oil will prime a lamp’s wick for the lighting, miracle stories prepare the audience for the cultivation of potent emotions and resultant ethical transformation.

Miracles have often been dismissed by scholars as little more than a method of pandering to the “bhaktic and magical beliefs” of the masses, and as mythical and secondary accretions. But miracles are employed throughout Buddhist texts to titillate productively; they prime audiences for the profundity of religious truths and cultivation of a miraculous epistemology. The presence of miracle stories is not a marker for establishing a line between monk and lay interests. We have abundant evidence of monkish interest in miracles; for example, Xuanzang was the epitome of a monk who was nonetheless, and obviously, undeterred by magic and who recounted many miracles without hesitation. And paramount monk Buddhaghosa himself becomes the central character in a miraculous meeting of monks recounted in Buddhaghosuppatti. In this paper, I look at a literary product of the religious virtuosi of fifth century Sri Lanka written for the consumption by other monks. Sure enough, in its very opening chapter it launches immediately

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2 Abundant examples of the forms and functions of such miracles can be found in the articles by Bradley Clough (2011) and David Fiordalis (2011) within this volume.

3 This is the stance taken by Conze in his Buddhist Thought in India (1973: 32), quoted in Brown 1998: 29.

4 Ibid. More work needs to be done with the slippery categories of magic and miracle; see Fiordalis (2011).

5 Buddhaghosuppatti, attributed to Mahāmaṅgala. Edited by James Gray. London: Luzac & Co. 1892.
into a narrative rich in the miraculous, a literary strategy to prime its readers.

The Pāli Mahāvaṃsa opens with a narrative account of the Buddha’s three visits to the island of Laṅkā. Certainly these post-Enlightenment escapades of the Buddha serve to lend an air of legacy and legitimacy to the Buddhism of Sri Lanka, and the narrative that places the Buddha on the island of Laṅkā proper serves to relocate the light of the dhamma, a narrative argument for the recentering of the Buddhist world. The Buddha visits the island at specified moments on the timeline in his biography. 6

The appearance of the Buddha’s physical presence in Laṅkā in the midst of his accepted biographical trajectory may be miraculous in and of itself – he must fly there, flight being a common miracle. Or can we consider the power of flight a miracle at all? Is it simply far along on the spectrum of possible human endeavors, a superpower to be sure, but one that may be humanly developed? 7 It could be argued that some miracles are not in fact miraculous, but instead completely reasonable effects of extraordinary human agency. As Robert Brown suggests,

It seems that the power that explains the ability to produce miracles is rather clearly identified in this regard, with a not particularly mysterious nor mystical way of achieving it. In short, when we are talking about human beings (including the Buddha) performing miracles, the superhuman power needed for their performance is more of an understandable human achievement than an incomprehensible characteristic of a divinity. It appears to me that within the context of the Buddha’s life, the possession of iddhi, the ability to perform miracles,

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6 The visits occur in the ninth month, fifth year, and eighth year after the Buddha’s Enlightenment.

7 As noted by Bradley Clough in his article (2011: 418), flight of the Buddha is frequently listed in the Pāli canon among the iddhi-vidhā: “...He goes unhindered through walls, enclosures, and mountains, as if through air. He dives in and out of the earth, as though in water... Seated cross-legged, he flies in the sky like a winged bird. With his hand he touches and strokes the moon and sun, so mighty and powerful. He travels as far as the Brahma world.” Samaññaphala Sutta, Dīgha-Nikāya ii.78
and the occurrence of the miracles themselves are not outside of natural laws for Buddhist believers and thus not unexpected.8

Perhaps, then, we should assume that the ability to fly is not wholly unnatural or even unexpected, but rather supernatural, and reason enough for those who cannot fly to be rather impressed by it. In the narrative it serves two functions, first to convey the Buddha to a new terrain and secondly, to impress the audience (both the yakkhas and nāgas within the text and the audience outside it). But in two of the three visits to Lanka, the Buddha moves beyond the expected miracle of flight and manipulates the environment, causing a terrifying darkness before revealing light. In the first visit, the Buddha’s goal is the removal of the yakkhas, and in the second, the conversion of the nāgas. (The third visit is not aimed at conversion, but instead teaching a community of established Buddhists – we see the nāgas already Buddhists who support the saṅgha, and so no dark/light conversion miracle is required).

Other than the obvious narrative merits of a scintillating opening chapter to hook the audience, what is the reasoning behind the inclusion of miracle stories at the very outset of what is ostensibly a Buddhist historical text? What are the characteristics of the miracles the Buddha performs therein? And what may be the desired lasting effects of the relaying of the miracles to a primed audience? I believe plausible answers may be found in the text itself, beginning with the proem that explicitly enunciates the intended cultivation of emotions of samvega (anxious thrill) and pasāda (serene satisfaction), and palpably illustrated in the stories of the Buddha’s miraculous manipulation of light and dark in the first chapter.

How do miracles cultivate a response? Characters model an emotional response within the text, which may be mimicked – at least the first time one encounters the story – by the audience outside the text. But after the first encounter, the miracle can no longer shock the reader/hearer; miracles are multifaceted in their function because they can only shock once. I would classify miracles in literature as expected miracles, both because the story as it is rendered in the Mahāvamsa offers no new narrative (the miracle

stories are told in the earlier Dīpavaṃsa and other sources) and because within the text there are clues, subtle and obvious markers, that point toward the intended effect of the Buddha’s miracles and help to construct the textual community. Beginning with the subtle, the Buddha Gotama is motivated to prepare the island of Laṅkā for the future reception of his dhamma, in verse I.20:

For Laṅkā was known by the Conqueror as a place where the sāsana would shine,⁹ from Laṅkā, filled with the yakkhas, the yakkhas must (first) be driven out.¹⁰

Even before the Buddha visits the island, the reach (and very image) of his influence (sāsana)¹¹ is conceived using the image of the dhamma as radiant light. Already the reader has certain expectations for the way the dhamma will be represented in the text, and choices in the language used and metaphors employed will heighten the satisfaction and emotional effect of the audience. Repeating words that conjure the image of light, such as the Buddha’s epithet Light of the World (lokadīpo), or to the light of the dhamma (dhammadīpa), helps to cultivate a reader’s sensibilities and expectation on a subtle and cumulative linguistic level.

The work of saṃvega and pasāda

Miracles involving complementary elements such as fire and water, or darkness and light, are of the familiar repertoire of the Buddha – familiar to those who have already encountered them. In fact, miracles of the Buddha “are limited in the forms they take” i.e., the miracle of fire and water, or flying through the air.¹² The expected

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⁹ Wilhelm Geiger translates sāsanujotanaṭṭhānam as “a place where his doctrine should (thereafter) shine in glory,” when glory is nowhere implied in the term. See Geiger 1912: 3. Obviously the addition of “glory” adds fuel to the fire of Sinhalese Nationalist discourse.

¹⁰ Mahāvamsa 1.20: Sāsanujotanaṭṭhānam Laṅkā ṇātā jinena hi / yakkhapuṇṇāya Laṅkāya yakkhā nibbāsiyā ti ca //

¹¹ Sāsana is an inherently practical concept that defies singular translation; it can be rendered as variously as “‘instructions,’ ‘dispensation,’ and ‘religion’.” See Walters 2000: 105.

¹² “The point is that miracles are specific to individuals, deities, and re-
quality of these particular miracles is buttressed by the structure of the narrative. The desired, cumulative, transformative effect of the text would come to be after a reader is primed through various narrative techniques. Hearing the various epithets of the Buddha, or the dhama described in terms of light would prime the reader, and the miracle stories even more so. Just in case the desired, cumulative, transformative effect remains elusive to the interpreter, however, explicit reading instructions are provided in the proem. At the very outset of the Mahāvamsa there is a clear articulation about the intended effects that the stories encountered within should cause. The first few lines of the proem of the Mahāvamsa, in the voice of the compiler, clearly articulate the intended result of the darkness and light will be to produce samvega and pasāda for the reader/hearer:

This [vamsa] avoids the faults of that one, [it is] easy to grasp and bear in mind, producing anxious thrill (samvega) and serene satisfaction (pasāda), and [it is] handed down through tradition.

Listen to this one, causing anxious thrill and serene satisfaction, in this way the grounds for making anxious thrill and producing serene satisfaction.13

The final verse of the proem, where attention drawn to the ethically transformative efficacy of hearing the text, is very interesting because it sets up or prefigures the refrain that is repeated at the conclusion of each chapter within the text. This verse essentially

13 Mahāvamsa 1:

3 Vajjitaṁ tehi dosehi sukhagahaṇadhāraṇaṁ
   pasādasamvegakaram sutito ca upāgatam

4 Pasādajānake thāne tathā samvegakārake
   janayantā pasādaṁ ca samvegaṁ ca suṇātha tāṁ
means: let this text initially provoke such a response in the hearer [you] so that the ethical/emotional response itself can serve that person as the grounds or foundation for further expressions of or manifestations of these emotions. In case one has not sufficiently digested the intention, these expectations are repeated in the verse that closes each chapter: “Here ends [the number of the chapter, followed by its title], made for the anxious thrill (saṃvega) and serene satisfaction (pasāda) of good people.”

The cultivation of samvega and pasāda is considered to have implications not just for the evolving emotional sates of the reader/hearer, but also for the actions and ethical choices he will make after being transformed by the emotional states. Andy Rotman has considered the actively compelling side of the generation of prasāda (Pāli: pasāda) that has practical consequences for the laity. He suggests that Buddhist orthopraxy essentially “traps” individuals and forces the act of giving:

Individuals who come and see prasāda-generating objects are compelled to make offerings. Not doing so would be tantamount to admitting that prasāda has not arisen in one. And if prāsada has not arisen in one, then presumably one has not accrued the vast amounts of merit such objects are capable of generating… [I]t is only the deviant who manages to get prasāda wrong.

As the first chapter of the Mahāvamsa illustrates, the Buddha’s miracle within the text is what “traps” the yakkhas and nāgas in the text to feel and then behave in certain ways, and the miracle stories “trap” the audience outside the text, instigating reactions to mirror the emotional and ethical responses modeled in the text. To be included among the virtuous listeners to whom the text is directed, a reader/hearer willingly submits to this form of entrapment and its concomitant acts of support to the religious community responsible for its production. If we extend Rotman’s idea about the compelling dimension of “prasāda-generating objects” to the

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14 Sujanappasādasamvegatthāya kate

ethically inspiring power of this narrative, we see that no reader of this text, circumscribing a particular textual community as it does, wants to find himself a “deviant.”

The narrative structure of the Buddha using terrifying darkness followed by enlightening light to great effect is strategically deployed in the proem as an abbreviated form to prime the reader for the full impact of the narrative itself. I argue that the Buddha’s miraculous manipulation of darkness and light reaches beyond the characters to be an effective narrative technique to provoke anxious thrill (saṃvega) and feelings of serene satisfaction (pasāda) in the reader/hearer. Easy to grasp and bear in mind, it produces in the hearer the antithetical emotional states of agitation (saṃvega) and satisfaction (pasāda) that engender further production of religious emotion and serenity. These antipodal emotions are necessarily developed in the order I have specified, as we will see in the following narrative when the Buddha causes fear followed by calm. The more agitated or fearful the characters (and by extension the readers) become, the greater the sense of calm, joy, clarity and satisfaction upon resolution of the hardship.

*Saṃvega*, according to Steven Collins, is the more intense of the two emotions. He defines the two terms in his translation of the first chapter of the *Mahāvamsa* as follows:

“Serene confidence” is *pasāda*, “animation” *saṃvega*. One cannot convey all the nuances of these terms. The first is often said to occur at Buddhist Stūpas; it is a clarity of mind, calmness, and a conviction in the religious value of what, or who evokes that feeling. The second is a stronger emotion (from a root meaning “to tremble” or “quiver”), and is used when some shock inspires an increase in the intensity of religious feelings and intentions.\(^{16}\)

In other words, the desired effects of the text are not simply emotional responses in the realm of aesthetic response. Instead, the expectations are for the hearer to be religiously moved by the catalyst.\(^{17}\) These two emotional qualities are employed in a sequential

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\(^{16}\) Collins 1998: 593, n. 2.

\(^{17}\) To be “religiously moved” in this context is no mere abstraction. I agree with Steven Berkowitz’s assessment of the pragmatic consequences of the
way in the Mahāvamsa to heighten the religious effect. The shock of *samvega* is not simply titillation; it is explicitly the feeling of shock and awe, and most importantly, it compels one to act on heightened “religious feelings and intentions.” Maria Heim notes that “*samvega*, translated variously as agitation, urgency, thrill, fear, and anxiety, is often used in Pāli sources to indicate fear that is capable of instigating a sense of moral and religious urgency.”18 The resulting calm after the storm, *pasāda*, is integrally related to the shock process that it follows. Concomitant with the satisfaction of *pasāda* is “a conviction in the religious value” of the catalyst for that emotion, typically the Buddha. These emotions thus operate in a religious sphere and the catalyst for such an emotional response is the miraculous display by the Buddha.

The darkness of ignorance, viscerally felt in the *samvega*, is replaced with the clarity and light of the *dhamma*, which generates *pasāda*. This equation occurs for the reader/hearer outside the text as well, as the initial reaction of the interpreter encountering the story would be empathetic fear, which is replaced by the serene confidence of clear understanding once the tension of the *samvega* is resolved. The semantic field of the term *pasāda* is also broad, enveloping meanings such as serene satisfaction and joy as well as clarity and light. The blindness of ignorance is dispelled by the heightened sensitivity brought on through washing facts with an aura of the light of the *dhamma*. The terrible darkness that is *samsāra* can, through the Buddha’s miraculous expression of compassion, be transformed into calm and peace.

heightening of one’s emotional states by the text. Stemming from his work on the *Sinhala Thūpavāṁsa*, he developed an argument where he is “not merely suggesting that historical narratives ‘evoked’ or ‘elicited’ feelings of gratitude from within the ‘hearts’ of medieval Buddhist devotees,” but instead he argues that “gratitude is a cultural disposition *instilled* by historical narratives and then *embodied* in a moral subjectivity that is understood to condition devotional acts of making offerings (*pūjā*) to the Buddha’s relics.” Berkwitz 2003: 582.

**First visit of the Buddha**

In his first visit to the island to dispel the *yakkhas* (demonic beings), the Buddha uses his *iddhi* to fly through the sky, and then, hovering over the island, he employs an effective attention-getter:

24 Standing in the air at the spot of the [future] Mahiyaṅgaṇa Thūpa, he made them anxious with rain, wind, blinding darkness and the like.

25 The *yakkhas*, afflicted by their fear, begged the fearless Jina for fearlessness. The Jina, giver of fearlessness, said to the extremely distressed *yakkhas*:

26 “*Yakkhas*, I will remove this fear and *dukkha* of yours; all gathered here, give me a place to sit.”

28 Having destroyed their darkness, cold and fear, on the ground given by them the Jina spread an animal skin rug and sat there.\(^{19}\)

The epithet Jina, Conqueror, is an especially salient one, and further evokes the feeling of submission felt by the *yakkhas* terrified by the resulting darkness.

While strongly felt, the fear from the darkness is but a temporary state. Fear and darkness destroyed, calm and light restored, the Buddha takes a seat, but the miracle is not yet over. The pattern of *saṃvega* followed by *pasāda* repeats, but with a fear-inducing fire followed by the gift of a calm island respite. The mat upon which the Buddha sits begins to burn at the edges, pushing the *yakkhas* back toward the edges of the island, frightening the *yakkhas* once more and effectively clearing the island for the Buddha. Through

\(^{19}\) Mahāvamsa 1:

24 Mahiyaṅgaṇathūpasa thāne vehāyasam thito
Vuṭṭhivātanṭadākārādiṃ tesam samvejananam akā

25 Te bhayaṭṭabhayaṃ yakkhā ayācuṃ abhayaṃ jinaṃ
tumhe abhayado āha yakkhe te ’tibhayaṭṭite

26 Yakkhā bhayaṃ vo dukkhaṃ ca harissāmi idaṃ aham
tumhe nisajjaṭṭhānanam me samaggā detha me idha

28 Bhayaṃ sitāṃ tamam tesam hantvā tāḷdinnabhūmiyam
Cammakhaṇḍaṃ attharitvā tatthāsino jino tato
his superpowers, the Buddha draws a neighboring, pleasant island near, and placing the yakṣhas on it, he thus “made this island worthy of men.” After expelling the yakṣhas, the Buddha returns to his prior location in Uruvela. Lankā is cleared of the yakṣhas, but the light hasn’t remained situated in its new place.

It is interesting to compare this account to the version contained in the earlier Dīpavāṃsa, where the Buddha’s magical manipulation of darkness and storm is slightly more expanded: “The man, standing like a yakṣha of great magical power and great psychic powers, made in an instant dense clouds full of thousands of rain drops, rain, cold wind, and darkness.” It seems significant that the Buddha is mistaken by the yakṣhas as one of their own kind. He most decidedly is not; he is the Buddha, while the yakṣhas are unworthy of even entering the path toward Buddhahood, according to this vignette. The darkness terrifies the yakṣhas; the empathetic reader, carried away by the narrative, should similarly feel a sense of awe, even terror, toward the Buddha at hearing of his exploits. The natural world is thus manipulated in the service of the Buddha’s ethical mission as he restores the light, but it is not the more gentle yet penetrating light of the dhamma. It is heat, a ravaging kind of light:

Just as the sun shines midday in the summer season, so terrifying heat was set in the body of the yakṣhas. Just like the heat of the four suns at the conclusion of a Kappa, even more so was the heat sent of the seat of the Teacher.

While the intended conversions will ultimately rely on light, here it is great heat, not explicitly light, that terrifies the yakṣhas. The

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20 Giridīpam…rammaṃ

21 Mahāvāṃsa 1.43: Evaṃ dīpaṃ imam katvā manussāraham issaro...

22 Dīpavāṃsa 1.54: Ṭhito naro iddhi vikubbamāno yakṣho va mahiddhi mahānubhāvo khaṇīyāṃ ghanā meghasahassadhārā pavassati sīṭalavā-taduddhini //

23 Dīpavāṃsa 1.58–59: Ṭhite majjhantike kāle gimeṇānaṃ surīyo yathā / evam yakṣhānaṃ attāpo kāye ṭhapita dāruṇaṃ // Yathā kappapparivaṭte catusuriyātapo / evaṃ nisīdane satthu tejo hoti tatuttati //
Buddha uses heat to help him purge the land of unwanted yakhas, and saves the light for his conversion of the nāgas.

**Second visit of the Buddha**

The second visit follows a familiar narrative trajectory; things are getting messy in Laṅkā and the Buddha, motivated by his omniscience and compassion, uses his superpowers to visit once more. A nāga family feud is brewing, and an uncle and nephew are fighting over a jeweled throne. Again, the Buddha employs his superpowers to get the attention of his audience (both the nāgas on the battlefield within the narrative and the audience trapped in samsāra outside the text – the readers/hearers for whom the text is supposed to work). Again, we see the powerful manipulation of light and dark, calm and storm, elements that are utterly natural in the appropriate context but that become miraculous when manipulated by the great iddhi of the Buddha. Once again, the miraculous display of dark and light are used to bring the audience (inside and outside the text) to desired emotional states:

58 Seated there mid-air over the middle of the battlefield, the Dispeller of Darkness produced awe-inspiring darkness for the nāgas.

59 Comforting those tormented by fear, he again revealed the light. Satisfied having seen the Sugata, they venerated the feet of the Teacher.

60 The Jina taught to them the dhamma that creates peace, delighted, they both together gave the throne to the Sage.24

After this powerful display, the Buddha teaches, and lands on the ground, and accepts the contested throne as a seat as well as food and drink from the nāgas. From his place, his station on the nāgas’

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24 Mahāvamsa 1:

58 Samgāmamajjhe ākāse nisinno tattha nāyako tamaṃ tamonudo tesam nāgānaṃ bhīmsanaṃ akā

59 Assāsento bhayaṭṭe te ālokam pavidhamṣayi te disvā sugataṃ tutṭhā pāde vandīṃsu saithuno

60 Tesam dhammaṃ adesesi sāmaggikaranam jino ubho pi te patītā taṃ pallaṅkaṃ munino adum
own terrain, the Buddha then established in the refuges and precepts 80 million land-and sea-nāgas. The Buddha uses the same terrifying technique with the dark followed by the light, but here it is a technique used to prime the nāgas for conversion, rather than expulsion. The nāgas are duly primed by the miracle to be able to hear the dhamma, and they are also moved by pasāda to respond by giving the contested throne to the Buddha, modeling homage. Recall Andy Rotman’s comment, that, “Individuals who come and see prasāda-generating objects are compelled to make offerings. Not doing so would be tantamount to admitting that prasāda has not arisen in one.” What might the message be for the audience outside the text, once that audience is initiated into this miraculous epistemology?

Conclusion

The recapitulation of the fully transformed nature of this island is expressed explicitly in terms of light in the climactic verses that conclude the Mahāvamsa’s first chapter, capitalizing on the language of light that has been employed throughout the chapter.

The climax of chapter one corroborates my interpretation of the form and function of this particular miracle. In the very thorough translation by Steven Collins:

So the Leader of boundless sagacity looked to the benefit of Laṅkā in the future, and saw the advantage to the crowds of Gods, snakes (i.e. nāgas) and the like in Laṅkā at that time. The Light of the World (lokadīpo), abounding in compassion, came to the good island (sudīpaṁ) three times, and therefore [or: through him] this island (Dīpo…ayaṁ), radiant with the light [or: lamp] of the dhamma (dhammadīpāvabhāsī) became highly respected by (all) good people.25

25 Mahāvamsa 1.84:

Evam Lankāya nātho hitam amitamaṁ ayatīm pekkhamāno
tasmiṁ kālamhi Laṅkāsurabhujagaganādīnām attham ca passaṁ
gā tikkhattum etam ativupuladayo lokadīpo sudīpaṁ
dīpo tenāyaṁ āsi sujanabahumato dhammadīpāvabhāsī
ti
Buried in a provocative and lengthy footnote to this section in his appendix, Collins explores this modified chiasmus (A-B-B-A) (Lokadīpo/sudīpaṃ / Dīpo...ayam/dhammadīpa) (Light of the World / good island / this island / light of the dhamma), modified because the meaning changes through each word. The Light of the World (the Buddha) thus poetically sets his sights on the primed island and transfers the light of the dhamma. Collins also pays attention to the homonymous pun involving the Pāli term dīpa, which means both island (Sanskrit dvīpa) and lamp (Sanskrit dīpa). Because the verb avabhasi (ava + bhasati) means “radiant” or “shining,” it obviously refers to dīpa as lamp. The context of the sentence reveals the meaning: the subject, lamp of dhamma, does the shining, not the island itself which is instead pictured as a primed recipient. The radiance reflects the miraculous light that was at the heart of the chapter. Deliberately employing language of light, this chiastic structure follows the structure of transformation, the function of the miracle stories that came before. Considering the narrative role of the Buddha’s miracles in the first chapter, we can discern a chiastic structure at play that justifies my argument about the emotional aims (and concomitant ethical transformations and behaviors).

Dhammadīpa26 is the light of the dhamma that shines, not the island of the dhamma that shines forth. Also, the chosen epithet for the Buddha here is Lokadīpo, or light of the world, and in the miracle examples we have analyzed here we have seen that the epithet saliently corresponds with the narrative (so, Jina [conqueror] when the Buddha is in the process of conquering). As Collins remarks, it would make little sense to call the Buddha in this context “island of the World.”27 This slesa, or double entendre, of dīpa was a nuanced pun utilized by the fifth century Mahāvihāran community responsible for the formulation of the Mahāvamsa, especially as it occu-

26 The popular translation of the term dhammadīpa as “island of dhamma” does not in fact reflect the light (dīpa) of the dhamma that is in the text, but instead anachronistic, nationalistic overtones. Note Ananda Guruge’s (mis)translation, “came to be resplendent as the righteous Dhamma” (Guruge 1989: 496).
pies such a prominent place in the running mythical narrative that establishes the Buddha’s *dhamma* on the island of Laṅkā. For the community of interpretation at the time of its composition, surely the dual meaning of *dīpa* was not only meant, but skillfully employed to extend the miraculous effect on its hearers. The semantic field of the term is broad and multifaceted, and this allows the work of the text to enter the literary rather than documentary mode. The miraculous, powerful light imagery utilized throughout the chapter sensitizes, prepares, or transforms the listener in a particular way.

The island, metaphorically like a lamp, has been primed, or made ready, by the Buddha through his miraculous actions. In this scenario, the Light of the World is an agent of transformation who is brimming with compassion (like the oil for the lamp), the requisite ingredient to insure the lamp’s viability. That this is argued by a fifth century Mahāvihāra text is no mystery; the text is quite clear for whom and why it has been composed (the end of each chapter reiterates the refrain, “composed for the anxious thrill (*saṃvega*) and serene satisfaction (*pasāda*) of good people”). Reading or hearing the text one becomes a participant in rendering its world wish;²⁸ who would want to be left out of the “good people” the text is claiming for its intended audience? To understand the dark-and-light miracle, to be an engaged participant in this miraculous epistemology, is to move forward on one’s spiritual path. The text asserts a particular worldview (namely, its centrality for the re-centered Buddhist cosmos) and a particular wish, that good people are primed and transformed by hearing it. That the concluding pun plays on the Pāli homonyms *dīpa* and *dīpa* capitalizes on the fact that the reader himself, a good person, has been primed for the dual resonance. Encountering the *dhammadīpa*, light of the *dhamma*, in this context means that the reader, too, is being subjected to the powerful tool of the Buddha – a miraculous, penetrating light.

The transference of *dhamma* is to a good island (*sudīpam*), namely an island that has been primed to receive the pervasive and

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²⁸ “World wish” is the term used by the contributors to *Querying the Medieval* in place of worldview to emphasize the constructive quality of the zeitgeist. See Inden *et al.* 2000.
penetrating light of the *dhamma*. Just as the *Mahāvamsa* itself has been “composed for the anxious thrill (*samvega*) and serene satisfaction (*pasāda*) of good people,” so this statement makes a claim about the ethical propensity of the island’s inhabitants. Just as a wick in a lamp must be primed, soaked in oil, before it will accept the flame, so the lamp/island is primed to receive the *dhamma*, and so the fifth century community is primed through the use of miracles in literature to participate in a miraculous epistemology.\(^{29}\)

**Literature**


*Dīpavamsa* — Oldenberg, Hermann (ed. and trans.), *Dīpavamsa: an Ancient

\(^{29}\) The image of a lamp with a wick needing to be primed would have likely been a ubiquitous one for the fifth century community of production. Geiger gleans information about lamp use from the *Mahāvamsa* and *Cūlavamsa* as follows: “Among the smaller household articles first of all lamps (*dīpa*) must be mentioned. The wicks were made of strips of stuff and the oil with which the lamps were filled, was sometimes a fragrant one (73.76), as the madhuka-oil pressed from the seeds of the tree Bassia laitfola, or sesamum-oil (34.55–56), or camphor-oil (85.41, 89.43). The terrace of Dutthagāmaṇi’s palace was lit with fragrant oil lamps (25.101). The ‘Brazen Palace’ in Anurādhapura caught fire from a lamp and was destroyed during the reign of that ruler’s successor (33.6).” He also notes how widely lamps were used in festivals, where temples and streets would be illuminated. Granted, all of this information is relayed through the text itself, and cannot be verified by external sources. Geiger 1960: 47.
Priming the lamp of dhamma

_Buddhist Historical Record._ London: Williams and Norgate 1879.


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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 chronological analysis of early Buddhist thought* .............................. 103
Indian Buddhist metaethics
Contributions to a panel at the XVth 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 Šāntideva’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 XVth Congress of the International Association of Buddhist Studies, Atlanta, 23–28 June 2008

Guest editor: David V. Fiordalis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>David V. Fiordalis</td>
<td>Miracles in Indian Buddhist narratives and doctrine</td>
<td>381</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bradley S. Clough</td>
<td>The higher knowledges in the Pāli Nikāyas and Vinaya</td>
<td>409</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kristin Scheible</td>
<td>Priming the lamp of dhamma – The Buddha’s miracles in the Pāli Mahāvaṃsa</td>
<td>435</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patrick Pranke</td>
<td>On saints and wizards – Ideals of human perfection and power in contemporary Burmese Buddhism</td>
<td>453</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rachelle M. Scott</td>
<td>Buddhism, miraculous powers, and gender – Rethinking the stories of Theravāda nuns</td>
<td>489</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luis O. Gómez</td>
<td>On Buddhist wonders and wonder-working</td>
<td>513</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Notes on the contributors* 555