On Buddhist wonders and wonder-working

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The present issue of the *Journal* presents five papers on the topic of the miraculous or the marvelous in South and Southeast Asian Buddhism.[1] In the following pages I will attempt to assess their contribution and outline as best as I can any new avenues of research suggested by the results and conclusions presented in these papers. I have chosen as their unifying theme the phrase, "wonders and wonder-working." In this way, I avoid the more esoteric "thaumaturgy," and, more importantly, I bracket (at least provisionally) the problematic term "magic." With these words I also try to find a neutral ground to move our discourse away from another word upon which some religious groups claim exclusive rights: "miracle." This is meant only to move the discussion along – such terms do not seem to me so problematic that I should avoid them as a matter of principle.

I also use the term "wonder" advisedly, since these papers cover a wide range of phenomena and accounts of phenomena, and perhaps the only thing that brings them together is the idea of a belief in awe-inspiring, unusual (though natural) and extraordinary events. My reading of these papers, moreover, inspired some reflections about the place of wonder, wonderment, awe, and mystery in Buddhist discourse and apologetics, and perhaps in religious discourse generally.

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[1] As indicated elsewhere, the papers of David V. Fiordalis (2011), Bradley S. Clough (2011), Kristin Scheible (2011), Patrick Pranke (2011), and Rachelle M. Scott (2011) were presented in condensed form as part of a panel at the IABS Conference in Atlanta, Georgia in 2008. I had the privilege of acting as the respondent to this panel. The following is a much revised and expanded version of the comments I presented on that occasion.

The papers reflect a stage in the scholarly discourse of Buddhist Studies in which we have begun to move away from the tendency to exoticize, if not stigmatize, magic, thinking of it as the wholly other, a way of looking at the world alien to the way "we" understand it. In particular in the oral versions of these five papers delivered at the IABS Conference, one could sense that these scholars, as scholars, felt comfortable, at home, in the world of magic, wanting to understand the significance of the discourse on the miraculous from within the cultural contexts where it occurs.

Still, much remains to be done on this topic that has haunted students of Buddhism for over a hundred fifty years, even when the debate is confined to canonical accounts of wonder-working.[2] In the following pages I wish to highlight some of the contributions of the papers under review, and suggest ways in which we can move forward in understanding the way wonders and wonder-working function and are understood within Buddhist traditions.

Talking about the impossible

The authors of the papers under review have also been cautious in their use of the problematic terms "miracle" and "magic," wisely choosing to concentrate on traditional categories and the contexts in which such categories are found. Bradley Clough and David Fiordalis focus their reflections on well-known canonical materials, offering a fresh look that questions some unexamined assumptions about the significance of concepts such as *ṛddhi* and *abhijñā*. Both of them, but especially Clough, highlight the diversity of the Pāli materials. Without rushing into idle speculation about relative chronology, they show that the terminology of the miraculous was not stable or consistent across time (not even within the Pāli canonical corpus). They both show ways in which such shifts in meaning can be exploited for what they can teach us about variations in usage and reference.

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[2] Consider that many of the issues discussed in this number of the *Journal* can be found in Burnouf 1852: 310–312, 820–824, and continue in many of the early works of the Pali Text Society. Many of the early sources are referenced in note 1 to Lamotte's *Traité* (1949–1980: I 329).

Exploring one such cleavage, Clough argues convincingly that "the *abhiññā*s were not always deemed a necessary part of the path to *nibbāna*," and that the tradition recognized the possibility of a path of insight without the higher *jhāna*s.[3] But, he also shows that in more than one account of the Buddha's "liberating awakening" it is the three knowledges (*tivijjā*) that are deemed crucial, and sufficient. This is especially true in texts that define these knowledges as divine eye, recollection of past lives, and knowledge of the exhaustion of the *āsava*s.[4] In these texts it "is these three knowledges," he concludes, "not insight into selflessness, dependent origination, the four noble truths or any of the other insights considered central to Buddhism, which function to eliminate ignorance and consequently liberate Buddha." (Clough 2011: 424)

The three *vijjā*s represent possibly one of the oldest attempts at making sense of the Buddha's awakening, a type of abstract ordering of ancient ideas about path and goal. Clough does well to emphasize the importance of at least some of the early usages of the term.

The concept and apparent referent of the three *vijjā*s illustrate the difficulty or impossibility of pinpointing a single, exact meaning for concepts such as *abhiññā* and *iddhi* (key normative and canonical terms denoting some of the most central features of Buddhist notions of the miraculous). But its use, especially in the *Sāmaññaphala-sutta*, also shows that at one point *abhiññā* was used primarily to refer to liberating knowledge and that its value as superordinate term in the list of 5 or 6 *abhiññā*s is probably younger. It is, after all, a well known fact of Pāli philology that in the older strata of the language the verb from which the term is derived simply means to know or understand fully.[5]

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[3] The discussion has been with us for quite some time – see la Vallée Poussin 1929, 1937a, 1937b, and the literature referenced in Gómez 1999.

[4] For instance, in the *Verañja-sutta* (AN IV.177–179), referenced by Clough, each of the *vijjā* (with an inversion of the order of the first two) corresponds to a separate watch of the night of the Buddha's awakening.

[5] See, e.g., *Suttanipāta* (Sn), prose p. 16, and stanzas 534, 743, 1041–1042.

Clough observes that the *Sāmaññaphala-sutta* also seems to contradict classical descriptions of how one attains liberation by/ of mind (*ceto-vimutti*), because in the *sutta*, and some parallel passages, one can reach the state of an arhant presumably without pure analytic insight and through sheer meditative effort, without ascending to the *arūpa-samāpatti*s. He concludes "such is the diversity of the early Pāli discourses that ... discussions, such as those found in the ... *Sāmaññāphala-sutta* ... place the *abhiññā*s at the very heart of the Buddhist endeavor." (Clough 2011: 431)

But I think he has also shown that in the early textual strata under consideration the *abhijñā*s were not wonder-working abilities (much less "feats of magic"), but rather, wondrous modes of knowing and understanding.

In the end Clough has given us yet one more example of how a single term cannot be taken to be univocal across all strata of the canonical tradition. This is particularly relevant when we consider the contribution of David Fiordalis, who, as already pointed out, also seeks to understand the "plurality of voices and perspectives" (Fiordalis 2011: 383) found in the classical literature.

Fiordalis is also struggling with the question of how the tradition understood miracles, but instead of following a term or a family of closely related terms, as Clough has done, Fiordalis examines some key passages where a judgement is expressed on the nature and value of the miraculous feats referenced by words such as *prātihārya*, *ṛddhi* and *abhijñā*. He examines several contexts and classical discussions regarding the belief (embodied in these three terms) in the human capacity to influence external bodies and minds through powers attained by Buddhist meditation virtuosi – the so-called "psychic," or prodigious powers of buddhas and advanced disciples.

He considers, for instance, the Jain critique, voiced by Upāli, that accuses the Buddha of being a mere magician (*māyāvin*) – a word that, in this context, most likely means a performer of deceptive trickery or even a fraud.[6] The Buddhist reply to this accusation

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[6] The word *māyā* is ambiguous; the breadth of its semantic field can be appreciated by a quick look at the corresponding columns in Böhtlingk-Roth.

seems reasonable enough: the miracle of teaching is far superior to the other two, and the Buddha excels in the performance of this wondrous feat. But, Fiordalis presents a nuanced picture of the argument. Referencing the *Abhidharmakośa*, he notes that the other two miracles are not to be dismissed as useless, for they do serve a purpose: they serve to attract an audience to more important things: the far superior wonder of teaching.[7]

We could say, paraphrasing Scheible's paper: the first two types of wonder-working "prime" the audience for the third wondrous transformation. The marvel of the first two lies in the way they make the audience receptive to the teaching, but the power of the third of the three extraordinary abilities rests on the marvel of teaching itself.

Nonetheless, a close reading of Clough and Fiordalis suggests that the *Kevaddha-suttanta* (DN I.211–223), Exhibit A, in the case for a Buddhist rejection of miracles and the supernatural – or for at least a nuanced or a hierarchical understanding of the three types of wonder-working – gives us very little to work with, and can yield more than one interpretation. I would add that the same can be said

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It can be a deception, a deceptive trick, as in the above context, it can be the work of an illusionist (*māyākāra*), but, it can be a display of unusual skill, as in the case of buddhas and bodhisattvas (see below). The two extreme poles of the semantic spectrum (and the implicit sustained pun) are at the heart of the *Bhadramāyākāravyākaraṇa*. Böhtlingk-Roth's "Gaukler, Taschenspieler" doesn't quite cover the full spectrum of the semantic field. Monier Williams offers: "'illusion-maker,' a conjurer, juggler." This is a bit broader, but still restricted. One should note that the Tibetan standard equivalent for *ṛddhi* is *rdzu-'phrul*, a word that, when applied to a non-Buddhist referent, implies trickery and deception as well. Also compare, the etymologically related *sprul/sprul-pa*, and the semantically related *sgyu/sgyu-pa* (illusion, deceit, hypocrisy) and *sgyu-mkhan* (trickster, illusionist).

[7] Fiordalis (2011: 389) quotes the compound as *pradhāna-āvarjana-mātra* – perhaps: "only to turn them in the direction of more important things." The Lusthaus-Hackett edition in Gretil reads, *pradhānam āvarjana-mātraṃ*. Still, I suspect the reading *pradhāna-āvarjana-mātraṃ* (dependent on *tābhyāṃ*) is to be preferred here. By the way, this whole section of the *Abhidharmakośa* (VII.45–48) is worth a more careful reading, as it addresses the question of the relationship between various kinds of knowledge and "spiritual powers."

of the approximate parallel passages in the *Saṅgārava-sutta* (AN I.168–173).

It is clear, nonetheless, that these two texts reject or disparage all wonders other than the wonder of teaching. For the *Kevaddha*, the reason is that the first two types of wonder, *ṛddhi* and "mind-reading," could be accomplished by means other than the power of a buddha or advanced disciple. The text is, therefore, establishing a difference between what is relatively ordinary (or a matter of technique) and what is truly extraordinary.

In the *Saṅgārava* the criteria that separate the first two wonders (*pāṭihāriya*) from the third appear to be a matter of who benefits from the wonder-working feat, a distinction that is taken to imply that the first two are not different from the magician's show. Thus, Saṅgārava explains that one can say of each of the first two (AN I.172): "Whoever performs this feat does so only for his own benefit. This wonder, Gotama, appears to be of the same nature as a feat of magic."[8] The reason for preferring the third is even terser: "this is the one wonder, Gotama, acceptable to me (*khamati*), the most excellent and most sublime (*abhikkantatara/paṇītatara*)."

One can add further complications to the picture by considering the commentary on the *Saṅgīti-sūtra*, the *Saṅgītiparyāya* (Taishō, xxvi, 1536, 389b17–390a9), which does not separate the third from the other two *prātihārya*s, rather, it establishes a criterion internal to each of the three wonders: a seemingly miraculous event of any one of the three types is not a true wonder (*prātihārya*) if it does not have the full effect required by the definition of the power, explained for each of the wonders as follows:[9]

> [1] If a monk, being one, can become many, etc., but he is not able to make others know and perceive [this feat], even if it is called an

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[8] A more dynamic translation would be: "seems to have the superficial qualities associated with mere magical show" – *māyā-sahadhamma-rūpaṃ viya khāyati*.

[9] This analysis is based on the Chinese version of Xuanzang. I do not know if the fragments of a commentary found among the Gāndhārī manuscript fragments contain any portion of this passage that could shed light on the problems – textual and interpretive – presented by this portion of the text.

extraordinary magical power, it is not called a wondrous display.[10] ...

[2] If a monk, through signs or words, is able to accurately take note of the thoughts of others, etc., as explained above, and if, once the Venerable arises from meditation, he ponders and measures [what he has perceived], taking note of all that is according to truth and all that does not accord with truth, if he then cannot make others know and perceive [what he knows], although it can be called the power of taking note of the thoughts of others, it is not called a wondrous display. ...

[3] If a monk, is able to explain to others: 'this is the noble truth of suffering, that I have fully known,' etc., as explained above, down to 'this is the noble truth of the path that leads to the extinction of suffering, which I have cultivated,' if then others, after hearing this do not feel receptive to the truth (*satyānulomika-kṣanti) and are not able to directly observe mundane truth in all its aspects, then, although it can be called the power of teaching, it is not called a wondrous display. ...

Here the *prātihārya*s are, once more, seen as either common or extraordinary ways of impressing others with striking gestures and displays of power, but only extraordinary or wondrous when they fulfill a particular function – something that, of course, only buddhas and advanced disciples can accomplish.

Returning to Fiordalis's argument, he broadens the range of the types of phenomena denoted by the word *prātihārya*. He considers other examples of *prātihārya* (*pāṭihāriya*), reflecting on the fact that the life of a buddha is seen as one continuous act of wonder-working – it is not a biography, we could say, it is miracle – com-

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[10] Here, "extraordinary magical power" stands for *shénbiàn-zìzai*, which, I assume, translates *ṛddhibala*; on the other hand, "wondrous display" is my compromise between a mechanical rendering of *shìdǎo*, assuming it renders *prātihārya*, and my understanding of Xuanzang's translation of the text (if *shìdǎo* is his interpretive translation). In this I am, on the one hand, projecting the Indic text of the *sūtra* onto the Chinese translation of the Commentary, as was often done by Stache-Rosen & Mital (1968: I 89–90), and on the other, I am assuming that *shìdǎo* reflects Xuanzang's contextual rendering of the word as "an instructive display." However, a quick check of Xuanzang's translation of the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa* actually shows *shénbiàn* rendering *prātihārya* – but *shìdǎo* does not appear in the Xuanzang's translation of the *sūtra*.

mon human beings cannot fathom it, cannot conceive of anyone doing what they know buddhas are able to do. As if the marvel of buddhahood were not wondrous enough, other prodigious events reinforce the message of the hagiography. For instance, the commentary on the *Mahāpadāna-sutta* of the Dīgha-Nikāya, explains that the major events in the life of a buddha are all accompanied by the prodigious manifestation of earthquakes (of the whole Earth, of course).[11]

Fiordalis grapples with the question of the significance of such events, or, as one could rephrase the question: why are these "miracles" (*pāṭihāriya*) and "wondrous and amazing things" (*acchariya-abbhuta-dhamma*, *aścārya-adbhūta-dharma*) so important, and why are they necessary (*avaśya-karaṇīya*)? He discovers hints of an answer in the legend or myth of Śākyamuni's contest with the three Kāśyapa brothers.

In the account of this encounter given in the *Catuṣpariṣat-sūtra*, Fiordalis sees a fusion of the two main types or tropes of the miraculous (the marvel of teaching vis à vis the other two, presumably inferior, marvels). As he cautiously puts it, "it appears that the two types of miracles have been condensed into one, or perhaps vice versa." (Fiordalis 2011: 399)

But I wonder whether this "condensation" is not yet another example of a pervasive trope in Buddhist literature: a person who knows reality can change reality,[12] one who understands all mental processes can know all thoughts, and the teacher is one such per-

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[11] DĀ ii.412, which Fiordalis compares with the list of causes of earthquakes found elsewhere in, e.d., DN ii.108–109 (*Mahāpārinibbāna-sutta*). This is a point worth further study, as is his aside stating that "natural causes and superhuman powers have been replaced by the miracle of Śrāvastī and the descent from the Heaven of the Thirty-three." I wonder whether there is in fact a displacement or replacement, and not simply a cultural gulf between our notion of natural and the classical Indian way of understanding what is ordinary and what is extraordinary.

[12] Consider the eccentric relationship between the semantic fields of our contemporary concept of "knowledge" and classical Indian concepts such as *vidyā* and *jñāna*. The overlap between the two universes of discourse becomes fuzzy at best the moment we ask the crucial question of what are the mechanisms by which knowledge can become effective action.

son. The trope is a statement of a commonly accepted belief, but it can also lead to (relatively common) playful narrative tropes (as I shall discuss cursorily below).

Fiordalis notes one such literary twist (although he does not highlight the humor in the story), when he summarizes the Twin Miracle (that is, the actual doubling of the Buddha's person), displayed only to create a worthy conversation partner for the Buddha. He interprets the serious side of the story: the miracle "combines the display of superhuman power and the act of teaching the *dharma*," also noting that in the fully embellished Śrāvastī legend, "later artistic representations of the event continue to depict the Buddha in the gesture of teaching." (Fiordalis 2011: 402)

This last point seems to blend elegantly with some of the reflections in Kristin Scheible's close reading of selected passages in the *Mahāvaṃsa*. Her take on the miraculous nuances the discussion in a different direction. It seems to me that her paper is concerned mostly with narrative effect (although, here, as in all five papers, there seems to be a certain blurring of the boundary between actual events and narrative events).

Her foils are "aptitude" and "authority" as possible ways to understand the apologetic and narrative function of the miraculous. Against this foil (but not rejecting it altogether), she prefers to see the wonder-working events in the *Mahāvaṃsa* narrative as "effective means of producing emotional responses that in turn incite ethical transformation."

I am not completely sure one can distinguish clearly this function from that of miracles as "signs of ... aptitude and authority" that are, in Scheible's words, "strategic literary exemplifications of the persuasiveness of the Buddha." (Scheible 2011: 435) I find it difficult to make the distinction, unless I assume that Scheible is separating potential suasive power from an actual, empirically verifiable, "emotional response," and from an actual "ethical transformation" (which I take to mean a change in behavior). Ultimately, the distinction does not hold, unless one can establish a clear dichotomy between literary device and literary effect, or a distinction between talk about obligatory emotion and emotion itself, or between authority, power and persuasiveness.

But, be that as it may, I find her concept of "priming" promising, or at least tantalizing. I also pick up a hint for my own reflections from her understanding of the subtle identification between the reader (or hearer) of a story and the characters in that story as a way to understand the imaginal world of Buddhist wonder-working. Both characters and readers are "worked upon, or primed, for the *dhamma*, ... [they are] terrified, subdued, awed, transformed, calmed, convinced, converted, and compelled." I will revisit these issues towards the end of this paper, suffice it to say at this point that one can understand "priming" to be a bridge between the possible actual event, the narrative event, and the belief that the narrative is the event. I am not sure, however, if this implication is intended by Scheible.

As to the readers (or the audience), I don't know that they are "compelled" to have a religious experience or "an ethical transformation," but they are in some way convinced; that is, the story can generate or reinforce religious conviction. Moreover, as Scheible astutely points out, "miracles are employed throughout Buddhist texts to titillate productively." (Scheible 2011: 436)

But, "titillate" may not be the best word. It seems to me that this choice of words is in tension with the way Scheible describes this "stimulation" as the revelation of "the profundity of religious truths and [the] cultivation of a miraculous epistemology." This choice of words (partly borrowed from Robert Brown) may be hyperbolic, for Scheible later on states (again, seeming to conflate event, narrative and mythos) that "some miracles are not in fact miraculous, but instead completely reasonable effects of extraordinary human agency." (Scheible 2011: 437) In explaining her idea of "completely reasonable effects" she approvingly appropriates Brown's statement to the effect that "the possession of *iddhi*, the ability to perform miracles, and the occurrence of the miracles themselves are not outside of natural laws for Buddhist believers and thus not unexpected."

I would agree with Scheible and Brown, but, "expected" does not mean "ordinary." I think there is a way in which a person within that cultural world-view will expect a miracle, but will nonetheless see it as extraordinary, as striking (perhaps the etymological

meaning of *prātihārya*), and, to borrow a pivotal term from Boyer (2001, 1996, 2003, 2004, 2008), "counterintuitive."[13] After all, the gap between a buddha or a bodhisattva and an ordinary human being remains; it is what allows for that tension that Scheible (2011: 438, 441, 442) describes as the cultivation of the opposite emotions of *saṃvega* and *pasāda*.[14] Hence, miracles are in fact extraordinary, though expected. The belief (established and expected) that buddhas are superhuman contributes to the feeling of awe, which is a required component for the audience's predictable emotional state, and willingness to believe (another connotation of *prasāda*).[15]

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[13] For an interesting example of the ways in which an "expected" and socially determined event can cause wonderment, surprise and excitement, because it is extraordinary, see Davis 1998.

[14] Scheible's terse definitions of these emotional states leave out some important elements of contrast, the opposition between the two being more subtle than she leads us to believe. The anxiety of *saṃvega* is a type of pressured disquiet, the counterpart of which is the serene trust (faith) of *prasāda* (one is not simply "serene and satisfied" when standing in front of a Buddha image, one also feels safe, protected, and convinced – hence, *prasāda* can bring joy and faith, and can be an emotion as intense as *saṃvega*, an emotion sometimes called *vega* – see note 27 below). Then again, the serenity of *prasāda* is the opposite of the (often violent) agitation and restlessness, even fear, of *saṃvega*. Hence "thrill" does not always capture that emotion. Fear and thrill are closely related emotions, one may think of the adrenaline rush of a rollercoaster as thrilling, but normally we imply a pleasurable fear – not a fear requiring a radical change in behavior. Besides, not all fears are thrilling: for instance, the fear of *pāpa* or *duḥkha* (both of which cause *saṃvega* and a sense of urgency called *udvega*), we would not call a thrill. Furthermore, I wonder if a miracle would produce *saṃvega*; as we shall see presently, it can produce a special kind of *vega*: *prīti-vega* ("a rush of joy"), which is in fact closer to *prasāda* than one would think.

[15] I am not sure I can agree with her judgement that the suasive power of a story is limited to only that initial experience when the story is still novel, that "after the first encounter, the miracle can no longer shock the reader/hearer," or that "miracles are multifaceted in their function because they can only shock once." If we think of these wonders as actual miracles, we should note that those who believe in miraculous or magical healing, will always be moved (not shocked) every time they feel the effect of the magic. Or, if we think of these wonders as literary events, we can note that predictable art forms can continue to have their "intended" effect or variants thereof throughout many performances. Isn't this the case, say, with the third

In the perspective of the texts under consideration, it is fair to say that "miracles" are, indeed, "completely reasonable effects of extraordinary human agency." This is precisely why they are types of *jñāna* (not the effect of supernatural agency). But, they are miraculous, insofar as they are inconceivable to those of us who do not possess the required knowledge or meditative skill. They may communicate religious truths, but above all they fill the audience with wonder and awe in the face of knowledge and power beyond comprehension (*acintya*).

They are meant to compel the believer to have a set of "hot cognitions" – either creating emotionally laden shifts in belief or, more often, reinforcing already established beliefs.[16] Above all, I think it is crucial to distinguish the socially compelling from the ethically compelling, if by the latter one intends to signal a major shift in individual behavior – commitment and the heightening of a sense of conviction do not require ethical transformation.

Notwithstanding these minor points of disagreement, I would argue that Scheible's analysis adds an essential component to the discussion: wonder-working as a literary event, the focus of which is the observer or listener, even more than the putative performer. She has shown that the miracle must be read within a context wider than philology or indigenous commentary. She has also shown the importance of an affective factor – even if that factor, I have argued, is difficult to identify. Her conclusions in fact reinforce and highlight some of the points discussed in the papers by Pranke (2011) and Scott (2011).

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or fourth time one enjoys and laughs at Tartuffe or Falstaff? Again, opera is, I would say, "predictable melodrama," and yet, aren't there those of us who cry every time Mimi or Lakmé die, yet once more? Expected and exaggerated, perhaps sometimes bordering on the ridiculous, and yet, a powerful art form.

[16] I enclose in quotes the phrase "hot cognitions" advisedly, since the phrase has become more or less a shibboleth easily misused. I am referring to the subtle interaction (or fusion) of emotion and cognition described, for instance, by Greenberg & Safran (1984); Abelson (1963) came up with the catchy phrase long before – more recently, see Morris, Squires, et al. 2003, and Lodge & Taber 2005, both of which form part of a growing literature on emotion and political reasoning, but I think much can be extrapolated from this research and applied to religious belief (see, for instance, Thagard 2006).

In the Burmese *weikza-lam* discussed in Pranke's paper, wonder-working takes a slightly different form. Pranke compares this non-canonical current to contemporary Theravāda beliefs surrounding the figure of the *arahant*. His paper reveals certain overlap in both conceptions, despite the obvious tensions at the institutional and doctrinal level. It is also tantalizing to see the extent to which this non-monastic tradition uses many of the themes and tropes of traditional Buddhist rhetoric.[17]

However, as Pranke clearly shows, this is a tradition that we must categorize with a typology different from the one that can be used to understand canonical accounts of the miraculous. In those accounts, the dominant trope is that of the power of *samādhi*. This is consistent with the rhetoric of the Burmese *vipassanā* tradition, whose history, from Medawi's first *vipassanā* manual (1754) to the present, is summarized in Pranke's paper.

The path of *vipassanā* is grounded on an ascetic or moral practice ("abandoning what should be abandoned, and practicing what should be practiced") which leads to "realization" (*paṭivedha*), "which is [none other than] the path and fruit of liberation." (Pranke 2011: 457–458) If the *arahant* should display any extraordinary faculties or miraculous powers, these are the fruits of this cultivation. With or without wonder-working, the *arahant* seeks the goal of liberation, *nibbāna*. Although it is not stated in so many words, this is the narrative of sainthood as embodied in the life (or lives) of the Buddha.

The *weikza-lam*, on the other hand, uses a narrative that appears to be historically and rhetorically (at least in the specific context studied by Pranke) in tension with the *buddha-arahant* narrative. Insofar as this alternative narrative is a Buddhist narrative, it seems

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[17]   This is not the place to discuss this fascinating labyrinth of parallels to other Buddhist traditions (and I do not consider myself capable of exploring the historical roots of these parallels), but one should note that the *weikza-lam* uses the doctrinal trope of the decay of Dharma as the justification for an alternative paradigm of sainthood, it uses the trope of Maitreyanist millenarianism, and exploits creatively the rich polysemy of the concept of *vidyā* as a term for a contemplative liberating knowledge that denotes charismatic miraculous power as well as spiritual insight.

to center (at least rhetorically and apologetically) on two Buddhist themes: the need to wait for the arrival of Maitreya (Metteya) and the power of *vidyā* as the science of wonder-working. The most distinctive feature of the *weikza-lam* (in contrast to the path of the *arahant*) is the idea of a technique or sets of techniques that make the *weikza-do* a competent or successful practitioner (I will not say a successful wizard or thaumaturge, because I am not sure any of these words truly encompasses the wide variety of functions that define his role). These are techniques in the full sense of the word: they are skills developed by acquired knowledge and training, and include the use "incantations and spells (*mandan*), alchemy (*aggi-yat*), particularly . . . the manipulation of mercury (*byada*) and iron (*than*), traditional medicine (*hsay*)," and the drawing of "runes or magical diagrams (*in, aing, sama*)." (Pranke 2011: 470, slightly edited). These arts are the tools of the trade that enable the *weikza-do* to serve as wonder-working healer or protector, but also hold the secret for his capacity to transform himself.

Nonetheless, as Pranke notes (470–471), the *weikza-do* will not neglect "normative Buddhist practices." These are "essential for any progress to be made," and include renunciation, moral restraint, the celebration of "the Buddhist Sabbath." In agreement with well established Buddhist belief, it is assumed that abstinence increases "spiritual potency (*hpon*); while *samatha* in particular is considered efficacious" in producing "supernormal powers" and for attaining skill in the "sciences" that are the *weikza-do*'s *vidyā*. In fact, even knowledge of the particulars of "herbs, potions and incantations" is enhanced by a life of ascetic and moral restraint.

Despite this important point of agreement, the practitioners of these techniques do not have the external appearance of a monk (and hence would not be regarded as *arahants*); and yet, they can demonstrate (perhaps we could say they seek to demonstrate) their sainthood by other means. For, as an important effect of the application of *weikza-lam* techniques and self-discipline, the *weikza-do* can display "liberation" by either abandoning the body completely (literally disappearing) or by attaining an incorruptible body. Their *vidyā* allows them to create a body beyond "injury or decay." Although, "the principal metaphor is alchemical, where the cor-

ruptible body is transformed into a stable substance, just as base metals which tarnish are transmuted into gold," the idea is not wholly foreign to Buddhist traditions, and can be seen as the flip-side of *nibbāna*.

Whether the *weikza-do* becomes an "*ashin-htwet,* or one who 'exits alive'," literally disappearing, or an *athay-htwet*, "one who 'exits through [apparent] death'," leaving behind a mummy considered an incorruptible relic, the *weikza-lam* seems to have come full circle. The powers of a *weikza-do* may not tally, on the surface, with the practice (*paṭipatti*) of the *arahant*, but, nonetheless, he can demonstrate his sainthood by becoming any one of these two *arahant*-equivalents: the one is no longer visible (his absence demonstrating his attainment) or the one who remains in a transfigured body.

The difference does not seem to me to be as radical as suggested in Pranke's initial depiction of the literal doctrinal stance – that "this tradition has as its goal not the termination of saṃsāric life in *nibbāna* as an *arahant,* but rather its indefinite prolongation through the attainment of virtual immortality as a *weikza-do*." For, one can easily see how the *weikza* goal can be construed as an equivalent of *nibbāna*. What is more, it can also be construed as the miraculous side of the abstract notion of *nibbāna*: to be liberated, and absent, and to be absent and present (in relics or teachings) are both miraculous events. Unless one settles for an abstract philosophical definition, liberation, as an event can only be imagined as something wondrous, an awe-inspiring, powerful happening and presence.

Pranke hints at the points of possible homology (historical or simply typological) between *arahant* and *weikza-do* when he states that they "share many qualities as ideal types including their ability to work wonders, and after their demise, to leave behind bodies that are immune to decay." (454) In fact the two types fit into a similar frame of expectations so that their rivalry or mutual suspicion reflects the fact that they compete for similar audiences – or at least, audiences sharing the same presuppositions with regard to sainthood and the miraculous.

Before turning to the last of the five papers, I would like to point
to the importance of the narrative implicit in a system where the
miraculous is inseparable from either the absence of the saint (his
exit, and the proof of the exit in a sacred and charismatic absence)
or his presence in a transfigured body that proves the liberation
of his mind. Although it may seem only remotely connected to
Buddhist ideals, it is, I would argue, an extension of the idea of lib-
eration as wondrous, magical event, an idea that takes many forms
in Buddhist history – to mention only the one that I will reconsider
in the last parts of this paper, this set of tropes can be seen as a vari-
ant of the idea of the bodhisattva as wonderworker, *māyākāra*, an
idea that feeds into the later ideal of the *siddha*. Although the main
topic of Scott's analysis is the use of certain narrative or rhetori-
cal strategies to redress gender inequality within the Thai *saṅgha*,
and hence addresses mainly issues of authority, she accomplish-
es her goals through a detailed and often perceptive description
of a variety of strategies. She may not be speaking of the suasive
power or the emotional charge of narratives of miraculous events,
like Scheible, but there is no question that her analysis underlines
the rhetorical function of miracle stories – magic as a story, and
story as rhetorical social strategy. As already noted with respect
to Pranke's paper, the miraculous event is invariably embedded in
an account, and the account, the telling of how it happens, is what
gives reality and power to the saint's charisma.

Among several strategies she highlights the most visible and dra-
matic effects of meditation: "miraculous powers (Thai, *itthirit*; Pāli,
iddhi) and superhuman knowledge (Thai, *apinya*; Pāli, *abhiññā*) ...
As with the list of *tevijja* (the triple knowledge), these powers both
validate and mediate authority within the Buddhist tradition. This
is as true for the Buddhist saints as it is for the Buddha himself."[18]

She reminds us of the stories of Mahāmoggallāna, which show
that authority is derived both from the display of extraordinary ac-
complishments (I would not know whether "spiritual" or "psychic"
would be the best word to describe such accomplishments – they
are best left as *ṛddhi* and *abhijñā*), but also from the implicit or

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[18] Quoted from Scott (2011: 491–492) with minor editorial changes.

explicit raw power of the miracle, a power that compels or forces others to submit.

As we saw earlier, earthquakes are introduced as narrative devices to remind us of the sacred and extraordinary character of events in the life of a buddha – lest we forget. Similarly, in the living rhetoric of Scott's saints, narratives of sainthood do not limit themselves to extolling the saint's wisdom (*paññā*), merit and virtue (*puṇya/guṇa*), or meditative accomplishments (as *samādhi*, *dhyāna*, *samāpatti* in their restricted technical sense), they must prove that this person enjoys the external manifestations of the *power* of sainthood. This is especially crucial when the audience may have reasons to doubt the validity of invisible things like wisdom, merit, and mental concentration, or when the holder of such powers does not fit conventional notions of sainthood (as when a woman presents herself as a master of meditation in a society in which even her status as a "nun" can be called into question).

Scott gives us a classical example as well. Thus, the Buddha asks Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī to show her spiritual status to an audience of unconvinced monks, and she must demonstrate that she can "fly through the air, emit flames from her body, and see all of her past lives with her 'divine eye'." (Scott 2011: 498)

But, the Thai nuns studied by Scott display a wider range of abilities, skills not included in traditional lists of *ṛddhi* or *abhijñā* – skills that we have seen as putatively distinctive of the Burmese *weikza-do.* These additional powers include healing (at least those illness due to karma - which Mae chi Thanaphon, for instance, can diagnose by touching the patient's body). Khun Yay displays quasi-shamanic abilities that allow her to see (through meditative power, of course) where the deceased have gone after death, and thereby somehow assist them and their surviving relatives. Conspicuously absent in Scott's examples is the use of ritual means – it appears that a special effort is made to foreground knowledge and mental power.[19] In this, Scott's wonder-workin nuns differ from Pranke's

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[19] I also wonder if these women are also skilled in the art of "talk therapy" (as some *curandera*s in Mesoamerica can be). I invite Scott to ask herself this question in any future studies.

weikza-do, who, as their very name suggests, rely more on the mastery of a *vidyā*, that is a "science" or technique, more than a cognitive or contemplative state brought about by moral and contemplative discipline.

Pranke and Scott bring us back to the present, reminding us that understanding ancient or arcane texts is, in the end, about understanding real human beings and human circumstances. With the classical materials we do not always have the means of imagining such contexts. The contemporary examples (Pranke and Scott), moreover, provide concrete examples of how the miraculous event is both narrative and (for the believer) embodied presence.

Further reflections

Notwithstanding significant differences in perspective and in the materials studied, these five papers converge on a number of implications. Although most of the events described in the first three papers can hardly be called "magic" – there is no ritual setting, no utilitarian end – all five papers bring out the intimate, if not necessary, connection between sainthood (spiritual value) and its concrete manifestations as wondrous events.

Overall, the dominant tropes are the display of marvelous actions or apparitions that demonstrate the performer's accomplishments as a virtuoso of self-control. The goal of such control can be encapsulated in two words *vidyā* and *abhijñā*, and the power or skill is denoted by the word *ṛddhi*.

From these studies we learn that *abhijñā* can be a goal unto itself, that it can be the fruit of a concentrated mind achieved by means that do not necessarily conform to the classical templates for *prajñā*, or *śamatha* and *vipaśyanā* (Clough). But we also learn that at least part of the neat hierarchy forming our heuristic for Buddhist wonder-working collapses. Levels fuse, and they seem to do so with a purpose (Fiordalis). The miraculous in fact may take center stage, backgrounding wisdom and liberation (Clough, Scott). Or the skills and techniques of the thaumaturge may become the ultimate strategy to achieve either embodied liberation or the presence of disembodied transcendence (Pranke). And a close

reading of miracle narratives opens the door to the manipulation of compulsory emotion (Scheible).

If we learn anything from these papers it is the way in which the terminology and the conception are not monolithic, and the ideas can be used to a variety of purposes, yet, the variety of purposes and tropes seems to converge on a constellation of themes: human action fostered and controlled by mental culture, a power born of discipline and necessary for the practice of the holy life, especially for its culmination in a vague state traditionally called liberation (*vimukti*), and the external manifestation or proof of that power and extraordinary freedom.

If I may now pick up some of these threads, I would like to point to other dimensions of the wonder-working trope as it can serve to integrate various aspects of doctrine and belief. First, I note the way in which Asaṅga (in a passage referenced in a note in Fiordalis's paper [2011: 390]) sees the function of the "lower" forms of wonder-working (those that are not direct or explicit teaching):[20]

> Now, this twofold miraculous power accomplishes, in a few words, two tasks for buddhas and bodhisattvas. First, by gaining the favor of sentient beings with the prodigious display of such powers, it brings them to the teachings of the Buddha. Second, this power confers benefit and assistance to suffering beings in many countless forms and in different ways.

These lines encapsulate an important difference between the main function of wonder-working in Pāli sources and its role in Mahāyāna sources. In the passage just quoted, a certain intellectual bias persists – here too the working of miracles is distinguished from the marvel of effective teaching. Nonetheless, "this power confers benefit and assistance." In Mahāyāna *sūtra* literature we can speak of a subtle shift, by means of which the wondrous and the didactic fuse into a more or less integral whole, *dharma* is in

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[20] *Bodhisattvabhūmi*, p. 46: *sā punar eṣā dvividhāpi ṛddhir buddhabodhi-sattvānāṃ samāsato dve kārye niṣpādayati / āvarjayitvā vā ṛddhiprātihāryeṇa sattvān buddhaśāsane 'vatārayati anugrahaṃ vā anekavidhaṃ bahu nānā-prakāraṃ duḥkhitānāṃ sattvānām upasaṃharati.* A parallel passage occurs in the *Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkāra* (*bhāṣya* to V.5).

itself a miracle, and miracles are themselves exemplifications of *dharma* (Gómez 1977). In a certain sense, we could say, the act of preaching during or after a miracle becomes the miracle that teaches or the teaching is itself a miracle. Furthermore, the salient aspect of these miraculous events is not the point at which teaching takes place, but the performance itself.

This shift occurs at several rhetorical levels. One dramatic example is the way in which *samādhi* becomes a type of performance (*ṛddhi* is, after all, the visible manifestation of mental prowess).[21] One does not exactly withdraw into an inner state of concentration, but rather, uses a state of concentration to reveal (by the sheer power of the concentration) to an audience a particular vision of an alternative (or parallel) reality – e.g., turning an ordinary mundane setting into the *Dharmadhātu*. This displacement of meaning is reflected, for instance, in the many names of *samādhi*s; each *samādhi* comes to signify a different window into such parallel realities (Lancaster 1976).

At the doctrinal or conceptual level this is reflected in the addition of four perfect virtues to the, arguably older, list of six *pāramitā*s. The additional virtues are all, in one way or another, expressions of the bodhisattva's saving will, skill and power: *upāya*, *praṇidhāna*, *bala*, *jñāna* (the latter in the full meaning of the word in the context of saving, wonder-working wisdom). Descriptions of all ten *pāramitā*s in the *sūtra*s become (if we judge by the number of words utilized) more a panegyric of the bodhisattva's wonder-working power than discussions of ethical doctrines. This is especially notable in the *Daśabhūmika*, and in similar *sūtra*s in the *Buddhāvataṃsaka* collection, such as the *Sūtra of the Bodhisattva's Ten Practices*.[22]

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[21] Consider, for instance, how one could conceivably jump from *ṛddhipāda* to *ṛddhiprātihārya*. This is perhaps a "misreading" from the point of view of both philology and orthodoxy, but it is not far from the shift we shall see presently in the use of the word *vimokṣa*.

[22] Tibetan (Sde-dge 305a5–333b2) *Yon tan gyi me tog shin tu bstsags pa shes bya ba byang chub sems dpa'i spyod pa bstan pa*, "The ten practices of the bodhisattva as taught by the Bodhisattva known as the One who Gathers the Flowers of Virtue." In the Chinese version attributed to the Central

The shift also occurs in changes in the way traditional tropes of wonder-working are placed within narrative passages. Words like *ṛddhi*, *abhijñā* and *prātihārya* change ever so slightly in function, qualified or nuanced by new terms or spins on old words that change, at least, the role of the old miracles. This new usage includes words and phrases such as *vikurvaṇa*, *vikurvita-prātihārya*, *sarvābhijña-rddhi-vikurvaṇa-prātihārya*, *rddhi-vikurvaṇa-abhinirhāraṇa*, *ābhijña-ṛṣibhūtā*, *dharma-jñāna-rddhi-māyā-abhijñā-sarvaloka-dhātu-spharaṇa*, *maha-rddhi-vikurvita*, *nirmita-upamā-abhijñā-vikurvita-vaśitā-prāpta*, *vimokṣa*, *vimokṣa-viṣaya*, *bodhisattva-vi-mokṣa-vikurvita*, and *vimokṣa-viṣaya-jñāna-vikrīḍita*.[23]

The term *vimokṣa* is especially interesting, since it puns by juxtaposing a canonical meaning of the term (*vimokṣa* as the gradual "release" of the mind from its bondage to object and concept in meditation) with one of the word's concrete referents, derived from the root *vi-muc-*, literally, "to release or let go, to shoot out." In the context of the Mahāyāna *sūtra*s, the word will mean the act and process of "manifesting a projection of oneself, releasing copies of one's body or emanations thereof, in a display of wonder-working" – all as the result of meditational prowess. The actual manifestation of the *vimokṣa* (in contrast to the mental process or state causing the manifestation) is a literal shower of marvels, usually displayed with several goals in mind: demonstrating the bodhisattva's ethical and meditative accomplishments, showing his wonder-working prowess, teaching the *dharma*, demonstrating the nature of reality, assisting living beings either with direct help or through teaching the *dharma*.[24]

Asian translator Śikṣānanda, the so-called *Avataṃsaka in 80 Scrolls*, this *sūtra* is Book 21 and is called "Book of the Ten Modes of Action" (*Shíxíng pǐn*) – *Taishō 279*(21), vol. X, 102b24–111a20. The equivalent in the Chinese translation of the Indian translator Buddhabhadra, the version known as the *Avataṃsaka in 60 Scrolls*, it forms Book 17, titled "The Ten Modes of Action of the Bodhisattva Garden (or 'bouquet') of Virtue" (*Gōngdé-huájù-púsà-shíxíng pǐn*) – *Taishō 278*(17), vol. IX, 466b3–474c26.

[23] Randomly culled from notes on *Daśabhūmika* and *Gaṇḍavyūha*.

[24] Needless to say, the canonical meanings of the term coexist in the same *sūtra*s that use the word in this peculiarly Mahāyāna sense. The reader will

The word defies translation, precisely because it plays on two very different meanings of the word. Edgerton's brief entry on the term encapsulates the difficulty the term presents and perhaps exemplifies the way our expectations regarding reality and religious doctrine can compound the semantic problem. I quote the entry under *bodhisattvavimokṣa*:[25]

> **Bodhisattva-vimokṣa** means a Mahāyāna method of salvation; various fanciful names are given to such mystical (and not specifically described) methods; e.g. in Gv 261.4 a "night-goddess" claims to have learned the **Bodhisattva-vi°** called *samantabhadraprītivipulavimalavegadhvaja*.

The problem with the definition is, well, that it is "mystical" in the weakest sense of the word. What are "mystical methods" if not methods we do not understand? And if they were "not specifically described," how could we understand them?

But, as a point of fact, these methods are described in detail. Granted that "description" and "method" (if those are the proper terms) are culture-bound; but, still the whole point of these extended and at times tiring passages is to describe the way in which the bodhisattvas accomplish and manifest their "release," in the sense I have just described – that is to say, *faut de mieux*, "their liberating manifestations."[26]

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also notice (here and in the passages to be quoted in the following pages) that there is a certain overlap between the concept of *vimokṣa* and that of *nirmāṇa* (which would mean, if we go with the etymology, "a constructed [copy or projection of oneself]," but which seems to be more "a phantom body" or a person with all the attributes of a human being except its own mind). The ontological status of both a *vimokṣa* and a *nirmāṇa* is not clearly defined although their functions are described in detail, see, for instance, *Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkāra* VII.5–7, IX.56–76, XI.30 (stanzas and commentary).

[25] Quoted with minor typographic changes.

[26] Parenthetically, note that repetition in this genre of literature may be a device combining the expected form of ritual with the suasive power of doctrinal formulae, a ritualized narrative in which repetition (of apparitions, miracles, and word) reinforces its claim to factuality. More on this below.

Let us consider briefly one such act of "release," the *samanta-bhadra-prīti-vipulavimala-vegadhvaja-vimokṣa* referenced by Edgerton. The text first introduces this spiritual accomplishment of the Night Goddess (*rātridevatā*) Pramudita-nayana-jagad-virocanā with these words:[27]

> [Sudhana] saw the Night Goddess Pramudita-nayana-jagad-virocanā in the midst of the circle of the Blessed One's assembly, seated on a lion throne in the calyx of a flower, having attained mastery of the bodhisattva's higher concentration (*bodhisattva-samādhi*) [known as the *samādhi* holding up] the "Banner of the Abundant and Pure Torrent of Samantabhadra's Joy" (*samantabhadra-prīti-vipula-vimala-vega-dhvaja*).[28] And he saw, emanating from every one of her pores clouds resplendent with the various acts [expressive of her] perfections, beginning with her generosity, a pleasing sight for all sentient beings, casting light on all sentient beings, illuminating all sentient beings, a kindly sight in the eyes of all sentient beings. Those were clouds that displayed her acts of generosity responding with a calm voice according to the aspirations of all sentient beings, ... clouds filled with the wondrous apparition of the inconceivably difficult acts of renunciation of the bodhisattvas of the three times.

The first thing we notice is that the text does not begin speaking about this as a *vimokṣa*, though the term is used several times in

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[27] *Gaṇḍavyūha*, Suzuki 243 (Vaidya 188–189). I take the name of the goddess to mean "She who Illuminates the World with her Joyful Glance (her Joyful Eyes, or Countenance)," a name appropriate to her accomplishment, and reminiscent of some ways of imagining Avalokiteśvara (*spyan-ras gzigs*). Avalokiteśvara's *vimokṣa* in the *Gaṇḍavyūha* (Suzuki 209–216/Vaidya 159–164) in fact establishes a clear connection between his commitment to come to the rescue of living beings and the power of his wonder-working.

[28] "Torrent" here translates *vega*, which I think in this passage fits somewhere in the range of meanings suggested by Böhtlingk-Roth's with the list "Andrang, Schwall (des Wassers, der Fluth), starke Strömung, starker Erguss (von Thränen) ... heftige –, schnelle Bewegung (insbes. geschwungener oder geworfener Waffen), ... heftiges Auflodern, Ausbruch (eines Schmerzes, einer Leidenschaft u.s.w.), Aufregung" – but, clearly connoting "a torrent of feeling." (See also note 14, above). The enthusiastic joy felt by bodhisattvas engaged in the practice of a bodhisattva (*samantabhadracaryā*) is compared to a rushing stream or a rushing army, and the *samādhi* signals or announces the arrival of such an *emotional rush*.

the following lines (*Gaṇḍavyūha*, Vaidya 196ff.). It is presented as a *samādhi*, reminding us of the canonical roots of the conception: *vimokṣa*s are the fruit of *samādhi*.

Yet, the emphasis here is not on meditation, but on its fruits, and these are not only soteriological (perhaps ethical, perhaps symbolic), but certainly miraculous. And it is not only that the narrative is meant to be miraculous, but that a *vimokṣa* is in fact a kind of miracle (albeit occurring only in narrative time – at least insofar as we can tell from the *sūtra*).

The *sūtra* proceeds to describe the Goddess's *vimokṣa* in detail, in a passage that includes many of the classical Mahāyāna terms for the wonder-working of buddhas and bodhisattvas:[29]

> As clouds of magically generated bodies (*nirmāṇakāya*),[30] teaching the *dharma* to sentient beings, emanated from every pore on the skin of the Night Goddess Pramudita-nayana-jagad-virocanā, [Sudhana] saw, in every detail and at every step the development of virtuous thought moments by the Goddess in her previous births, beginning with the way she acquired her provision [of merit and wisdom] since she first formed her aspiration to awakening. And [Sudhana also saw how those bodies] engaged in continuous and uninterrupted acts of praise for the arising of the aspiration to awakening, gladly adopted birth and death (*cyuty-upapatti-parigraha*) continuously and without interruption[.][31]

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[29] *Gaṇḍavyūha*, Suzuki 250–252 (Vaidya 193–195).

[30] The usual translation of *kāya* as "body," is, as translations go, acceptable, but one must bear in mind that, with reference to buddhas or bodhisattvas, it denotes the whole embodied person. In that sense it is similar to some uses of the term *ātmabhāva*. As to *nirmāṇa*, the literal meaning, is an object fashioned or constructed through artifice, not a "creation out of nothing," but a recombination of elements, mostly mental or moral forces controlled by the power of *samādhi*. As applied to non-sacred magic, the usual conception is that of illusion: making the audience see an object where there is none, or seeing an object as different from what it actually is.

[31] In other words, the *vimokṣa* displays the previous lives of the Night Goddess and the bodhisattva practices she performed in every possible world she visited in the past. It is a live demonstration of the bodhisattva's career. It is, so to speak, "a performed recollection of past lives."

The *vimokṣa* is therefore the vehicle or the process by which the Night Goddess (as a bodhisattva) carries out her salvific action, adopting multiple personae – whether we understand these as phantom bodies or as duplications of herself is not crucial for understanding the passage. These many persons or bodies evidently respond to their environments, and, presumably to the variety of human beings ready to receive the teaching. Hence, the various apparitional beings projected by the Goddess

> adopted different **bodies and personalities** (*ātmabhāva-parigraha*) continuously and without interruption, adopted the full range of human names continuously and without interruption, approached good virtuous friends continuously and without interruption, ... attained higher states of concentration (*samādhi*) continuously and without interruption, and in acquiring those higher states of concentration had a vision of the buddhas continuously and without interruption, ... [He saw how those bodies] were continuously and without interruption in possession of the knowledge (*jñāna*) that penetrates [everywhere in the world seen as the] Sphere of Dharma (*dharmadhātu*), were continuously and without interruption in possession of the knowledge that [allowed them] to gaze [at sentient beings everywhere] in the World of Sentient Beings (*sattvadhātu*), ...

The link between this sort of miraculous apparition and earlier canonical notions of the extraordinary powers (*abhijñā*) is established in the lines that follow:

> [He saw how those bodies] continuously and without interruption acquired for their first time the divine eye (*prathama-divyacakṣus*),[32] continuously and without interruption were able to [hear and] cognize (*vijñapti*) for the first time with the divine ear (*prathama-divyaśrotra*), continuously and without interruption acquired for their first time the knowledge of the thoughts of other sentient beings (*prathama-parasattvacittajñāna*), continuously and without interruption acquired for their first time the recollection of the past lives of themselves and of other sentient beings (*prathama-ātmaparasattva-*

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[32] Each of those duplicated bodies of the Night Goddess shows the first time she attained such powers, but I wonder if the implication is not that the bodies also repeat (as a display or re-performance) every time she *manifested* them again (in a future rebirth she would not be acquiring the power, but merely recollecting or recovering it from her past experience).

pūrvanivāsānusmṛti), continuously and without interruption acquired for their first time the conditions giving them the extraordinary capacity (*ṛddhi*) to effortlessly (*anabhisaṃskāra*) remain grounded in the absence of any substantial thing (*abhāva-pratiṣṭhā*),[33] continuously and without interruption acquired for their first time the prowess of [manifesting] the accomplishments of great miraculous powers (*maharddhivikrama*) that allow them to pervade [all] regions [of the universe], continuously and without interruption gained mastery over the liberating manifestations (*vimokṣa*) of the bodhisattvas,[34] continuously and without interruption gained the inconceivable passage through this the ocean of the liberating manifestations of the bodhisattvas, continuously and without interruption acquired [the capacity to] work the transforming power (*vikurvita*) of the bodhisattvas, continuously and without interruption acquired the prowess (*vikrama*) of the bodhisattvas, and continuously and without interruption acquired [all other marvelous faculties,] up to accessing the most subtle knowledge (*jñāna*) of the bodhisattvas ...[35]

As she preached the *dharma*, the Night Goddess was able to adapt her voice to the expectations of her audience: teaching to some with a voice that could make the world shake down to the cosmic disk of wind, to others with a voice that would murmur down to the cosmic disk of water, to others with a voice like the crackling of a fire, or the roaring of the ocean, with the voice of god kings or of the king of the *nāga*s, the voice of asuras and *gandharva*s, of human monarchs and brahmins, or even with the voice and speech of all other sentient beings. And Sudhana could see the clouds of magically generated bodies multiplying, for all sentient beings, the objects created in Pramudita-nayana-jagad-virocanā's liberating manifestations (*vimokṣaviṣaya*) with all sorts of playfully ornamented emanations (*savimokṣavikrīḍita*). With this twist we begin

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[33] The compound is analyzed according to Tib., Sde-dge Vol. 'A, fol. 105b.1, *thog ma dngos po med pa la rab tu gnas te/mngon par 'du bya ba myed* [sic.] *pa'i rdzu 'phrul thob pa'i rkyen gcig nas gcig tu brgyud cing 'dab chag pa dang/* – text of the TBRC digital version of the Sde-dge Black Bka'-'gyur, p. 210.

[34] Here *vimokṣapratilābha*, which may be redundant.

[35] Here, *jñāna* seems to mean an even higher knowledge and skill than the other extraordinary accomplishments just described.

to see a shift to the soteriologic or salvific function of the *vimokṣa*, for Sudhana could see that each of the magically produced bodies in these clouds of magically created apparitions

> in each moment of thought would purify an indescribable number of innumerable buddha-fields in the ten directions. He saw that they were liberating (*vimocyamāna*) infinitely boundless oceans of sentient beings from all the pains of the unfortunate destinies of rebirth, establishing an infinitely boundless universe of sentient beings in the fortunate states of gods and humans ... in the terraced levels of the *śrāvaka*s and *pratyekabuddha*s ... bringing in one moment of thought infinitely boundless oceans of sentient beings to the tenth terrace [of the bodhisattva].

Sudhana contemplates this vision, listens attentively to the teaching being imparted, ponders and understands the significance of these events, all of this

> because of the transforming and overpowering effect, the inspiration (*vikurvita-vṛṣabhitā-anubhāvena*) of Pramudita-nayana-jagad-virocanā's inconceivable bodhisattva manifestation (*acintya ... bodhisattva-vimokṣa*), [called] the "Banner of the Abundant and Pure Torrent of Samantabhadra's Joy," because [such liberating power] was due to the practice of a similar conduct in the past, and because he had been directed and authorized with the blessing (*ādhiṣṭhānādhiṣṭhitatvād*) of the *tathāgata*s.[36]

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[36] For the time being I offer this translation of the crucial term *adhiṣṭhāna* only as *une traduction de pis aller*. An *adhiṣṭhāna*, in this context, is an act of appointment by an obviously higher being (a buddha), directing and authorizing a disciple (usually a bodhisattva) to receive a teaching (especially one that will give the appointee special abilities or powers). Hence, the crucial ritual use of the term, especially in so-called "Tantric" Buddhism, where the concept has been translated in Tibetan as *byin-gyis rlob-pa*, possibly, "to invoke or confer by speech a position of rank or majesty," the corresponding noun is these days usually translated into English as "empowerment." In Chinese, traditional equivalents ranged from *chéng*, "to receive an order or a commission (from a superior)," to the more explicit *suǒhù* or *wèihù*, "to accept provisionally (a position or a charge)," finally settling on *jiāchí*, "to give support and direction, to exert control over" – the latter having become the most common term for the ritual enactment of an *adhiṣṭhāna*. This is yet another example of a peculiar sort of miraculous intervention. The concept is worthy of further study – cf. *Visuddhimagga* (Vism) 378–388, 405–406,

Sudhana was also capable of witnessing and appreciating this marvelous display because his inconceivable roots of good had come to maturity, rending him a worthy vessel for the practice of the perfect good conduct of the bodhisattva (*samantabhadrā bodhisattvacaryā*).

I will not belabor the point or explore further yet other Mahāyāna uses of the wonder-working trope. One need only consider the variety of treatments, ranging from the marvels of a purified field and its "creation," "purification," or "marvelous purification," to the irony of Vimalakīrti's apparent contradictions (literal and figurative wonder-working in the same passage), and the less humorous ambiguity in the display of Maitreya's *kūṭāgara*. A quick consideration of this diversity, and the complexity of the images considered in the five papers in this issue shows, in my view, that there is no simple answer to the question of what is a Buddhist miracle, much less a single answer to the question of the meaning and significance of Buddhist narratives of prodigious events.

However, the short passage quoted above shows that at least in one witness (the *Gaṇḍavyūha*) one can argue that wonder-working powers serve, at the same time, a variety of functions and conform to a variety of tropes that work across several layers of meaning that could be called, for lack of a better term, the doctrinal levels or underpinnings of wonder-working, to wit: meditation as concentration, meditation as liberating power, meditation as magical power, the illusory character of reality (which is, after all, like a magical trick, *māyā*, or a magical creation, *nirmāṇa*), the uniqueness of buddhas, the salvific action of bodhisattvas, the transcendent freedom of liberation as a sequence of wondrous events, etc. In the *Gaṇḍavyūha*, however, these tropes also integrate the wisdom of the story-teller, for, with the concept of *vimokṣa*, the story embodies the encounter between imaginal events and reader (audience) response, what is more, the text could be taken to suggest that the story itself responds to the reader (the Night Goddess, in transforming the reader, transforms herself).

Daśabhūmika, Chapt. 1, stanzas 17–19.

Concluding observations

So far, I have avoided "miracle" and "magic,"[37] mostly following traditional Indian Buddhist categories in their contexts, and using English words that seemed to me more neutral. Nonetheless, one cannot avoid asking how one is to speak about beliefs, practices and narratives that refer to what appears to us to be impossible.

I should note, first, that some of the examples collected in all five of the papers in this issue of the *Journal* fit a narrow definition of miracle: there is a sense in which they are miraculous, that is, they are caused or performed by buddhas and bodhisattvas, who somehow interfere in the normal order of things, and whose magical acts and the fruits thereof are considered to be somehow superior or radically different from those of other teachers and wonder-workers.

Sudhana is transformed because of his own merit, but, he is ready to be transformed, above all, because he has been inspired, overpowered and transformed (*vikurvita-vṛṣabhitā-anubhāvena*)[38] by the wondrous apparition or manifestation (*vimokṣa*) wrought by the goddess, and because he has been blessed and authorized by the majestic authority of the *tathāgata*s (*ādhiṣṭhānādhiṣṭhitatvād*). Such miraculous acts are, of course, different from the acts of those who are "mere" performers of tricks of magic (*māyākāra*, when the term is used pejoratively).

But these examples raise another issue that I believe is raised in the five papers I have reviewed, at times coming to the surface, at times hiding beneath the surface, like a thread running through a tapestry. It is the question mostly raised by Scheible, about the function of the rhetoric of narrative. In three of the five papers, all the examples adduced are stories about wonder-working, not actu-

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[37] The reader may have noticed I have used the words "magic" and "magical" in quotation marks, and also when referring to *nirmāṇa*, which are usually considered to be similar to the acts of a magician – that is, the *māyākāra*, the performer who does tricks of magic independent of any ritual context.

[38] Slightly changing the order of the terms to arguably reflect a more natural English order. It is not clear to me that the original implies any particular hierarchy.

al, observable examples of what a believer might consider a miracle or a feat of magic. Even doctrinal statements regarding the miraculous accomplishments of buddhas and bodhisattvas harken back to a tradition of miracle stories (see especially Fiordalis's paper).

Fictional or not, these stories invite us to ask a number of questions. We may ask what would be the most appropriate way of understanding the events depicted, or the depiction of these imaginal events, and we may also ask what the purpose or function of such depictions might be.

First, as to the nature of the events, the stories reflect a culture that assumes (even in its literate and elite modalities) the occurrence of feats of wonder-working, actual and expected from certain types of virtuosi, but, nonetheless extraordinary, in fact, in contemporary cognitive theory we would say, they are "supernatural" events.[39] I have suggested above, moreover, that the events depicted fall into different points on a spectrum: from an event that seems like a true miracle, yet is nothing but a cheap trick (the skill of a mere "illusionist," like Bhadra),[40] to the illusion created by a buddha or a bodhisattva, which is "a real illusion" – in other words it is the fruit of a type of true knowledge, *jñāna* (or *abhijñā*) that is intellectual perceptual and instrumental knowledge, an understanding and control over the "natural" order of things, such that allows the knower to change that order.

The association of wonder-working with control hides an implicit world-view that includes a valuation of reality, of cognition and of the ultimate good. We may then speak (*faut de mieux*) of an

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[39] Some of my colleagues in Buddhist Studies may resist the term (the same way some resisted for a long time the adjusted, secular usage of "theology" without reference to a "theos"), but the term is an expedient short hand for the theory of the counterintuitive first formulated by Boyer (1994).

[40] Régamey's (1938/1990) translation of *sgyu-ma-mkhan* as "juggler" perhaps reflects the old dictionary entries on *māyākāra*, but Bhadra is obviously not a a simple juggler (unless one uses the term loosely to mean "a fraud"); he creates illusions or miraculous apparitions (*māyā*) that are deceptive or fraudulent (another meaning *māyā*), but nonetheless fool his audiences into believing that they are the real thing (the definition of "real thing," being, of course, always contested). See notes 6, 34 and 35, above.

ontology, an epistemology and a soteriology of wonder-working. The master of meditation is also a master magician and a master of reality, and in this mastery lies the liberating power of meditation, as if *ṛddhipāda* were simultaneously the basis for liberation and the basis for extraordinary, wondrous powers (or, perhaps better, in the inverse order).

This multivalence in the significance of wonder-working is at the heart of the narratives that form the object of the five papers I have examined and of the materials I have adduced. Such polysemy is found in early as well as late texts. In non-Mahāyāna literature one can mention as an example the Buddha's encounter with the highway robber Aṅgulīmāla, as recounted in the *Aṅgulīmāla-sutta* of the Majjhima-Nikāya (MN II.97–106).[41] In this canonical passage, the power of *iddhi* appears to have three functions: the literal (presupposing a belief in the existence and efficacy of such powers), the suasive (an instrument for teaching within the narrative), and the iconic (the embodiment of some aspect of the object of the teaching – perhaps of both an experience of freedom and an experience of reality).

The highway robber Aṅgulīmāla follows the Buddha with an intent to murder him; but then,

> the Blessed One willed a mental power (*iddhābhisaṅkhāraṃ abhiṅkhāsi/abhisaṃkāresi*) such that Aṅgulīmāla, running with all his might, could not overtake the Blessed One who kept walking at his normal pace.

> At this, the highway robber Aṅgulīmāla thought: "For sure this is extraordinary! For sure this is marvelous![42] For I am used to running

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[41] See also E. W. Burlingame's (1921) elegant translation of the equivalent story in the *Dhammapada-aṭṭhakathā* (Dhpa III.6–14). This legend represents an early antecedent of Mahāyāna tropes exemplified by the *Suṣṭhiparipṛcchā – Taishō*, xi, 310(36), where the Buddha's wonder-working powers move Mañjuśrī to attack him with a sword, knowing all too well that the Buddha, the sword and Mañjuśrī are empty, and hence at rest, inactive, incapable of doing anything.

[42] These two expressions, *acchariyaṃ vata bho, abbhutaṃ vata bho*, are part of the puzzle, and deserve further study. They represent the Buddhist equivalent of the concept of counterintuitive: surprising and overpowering.

after even ... a gazelle overtaking it and catching it. But now, on the contrary, running with all my might, I cannot overtake this shramana who walks at his normal pace."

He stopped and called out to the Blessed One, "Stop, shramana, stop shramana!"

"I stand still, Aṅgulīmāla, why don't you stop?" ...

Then Aṅgulīmāla addressed the Blessed One in verse:

"While walking, shramana, you say, 'I stand still.'

But to me standing still, you say, 'you have not stopped.'

I ask you, shramana, for the meaning of this.

How do you stand still? How is it I have not stopped?"

"Always and everywhere, Aṅgulīmāla, I stand still,

for I have cast off violence toward all living things.

But you cannot stop yourself in how you treat living beings.

Therefore, I have stopped and you have not."

In this story the power of "stopping" is a marvel at four levels: the *ṛddhi* that allows a buddha to literally control the movement of others, *ṛddhi* as the mental power of concentration, the *ṛddhi* of equanimity as self-restraint, and the *ṛddhi* of a liberating, faith-inspiring teaching (Aṅgulīmāla understands, surrenders, and joins the Order). There is still, however, no indication that the feat of wonder-working reveals something about the nature of reality. This fourth meaning of *ṛddhi* will find full expression in the Mahāyāna – witness, for instance the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa* and the *Suṣṭhimati-paripṛcchā* of the Ratnakūṭa.[43]

To these four layers of meaning I will add a fifth: the wonder of the story itself. We would then have five layers, five tropes, which, for lack of better words, I will call (1) the literal – the feat of wonder working, (2) the wonder of meditative power (power over mind and power of mind), (3) the wonder of virtue and benevolence (here, the ceasing of aggression and hostility and the birth of a benevolent attitude), (4) the wonder of liberation (stillness as a state of freedom),

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[43] See note 41.

(5) the wonder of persuasion (the aesthetic or affective dimensions of the story, its function as rhetoric device).

To approach a conclusion, I would now like to focus briefly on the last of these layers suggesting some way that we could begin to understand the phenomenon of these narrative events, suggesting some possible avenues for future research.

Despite obvious difference in style and genre, one may compare the events narrated in the *Aṅgulīmāla-sutta* with those found in the *Gaṇḍavyūha-sūtra*: both texts imply a resonance between doctrine, magic, and story, and between the events of a story and a kind of script for the events (imaginal or actual) of liberating insight and liberating power. The various levels suggest a concept of resonance for which I believe certain Chinese models of aesthetic response may be useful, or at least suggestive of a starting point. The link between this aesthetic conception and Buddhist miracle stories has been summarized skillfully by D. Stevenson who uses this link to understand what he calls the "structure and organization" of miracle tales, but which I rather call the semiotic layering of the tales.

In the words of Stevenson (1995: 429):

[P]ivotal [to the thematic structure and organization of miracle tales is the] notion of "numinal sympathy or response" (*lingying* or *yingxian*)[44] ... Implicit in virtually all of the miracle tales (and, indeed, Chinese Buddhist hagiography as a whole) is the age old Chinese discursive structure of "stimulus" (*gan*), "response" (*ying*),[45] and "causal impetus or nexus" (*ji* or *jiyuan*).[46] ... spiritual progress and sanctity entail

[44] I assume Stevenson uses the less common "numinal" intentionally, to distinguish it somehow from numinous, but I am not sure. At any rate, the Chinese conveys a sense of correspondence or resonance (*yìng*) with the spirit world (*líng*), an almost natural response that makes the spirits become present or manifest (*yīngxiàn*).

[45] The "stimulus" (*gǎn*) is the emotional stimulus and the emotion itself (also *gǎn*): a feeling is what moves the heart/mind; the ensuing "movement" of the heart is the correspondence, *yìng*, of event and feeling. As a verb, *gǎn* means both to affect and to be affected, also to move or stir (feelings); as a noun, "affect or feeling."

[46] The word *jī* actually denotes a machine, instrument or device that functions by responding to some sort of input and produces a predictable effect

a resonance between the aspirant and the sacred order at large, rather than the appropriation of one solely by or in terms of the other.

The resonance, sympathy or sympathetic accord presupposes a resonance-device or a mechanism (here conceived as somehow "spiritual") which we may imagine as a psychological predisposition that makes the stories effective.

> As the *gangying* metaphor would have it, spiritual "presence" or "manifestation" (*ying*) – whether that presence be construed as the descent of the buddhas, the arousing of the thought of enlightenment, auspicious omens, miraculous responses, even enlightenment itself – is effected by the devotee "coming into sympathetic accord" or "tally" with the hidden sacred order and forging a "causal impetus or nexus" (*ji*, *jiyuan*) that "stimulates" (*gan*) a flow or manifestation of sacred power. Miraculous response, as such, is the function of a commutative interaction between aspirant and the sacred order and not purely the work of either thaumaturgy on the part of the subject or numinal intrusion on the part of the cult object. (Stevenson 1995: 429)

Mutatis mutandis, we may speak of a similar nexus between sacred (or wonder-working) narrative and religious action and emotion – whether these are expected (as they often are) or seemingly novel and spontaneous. The narrative is what Stevenson describes as a "manifest trace" of the expected or effected response:

> Often characterized as a "manifest trace," "sign," or "event," the very concept of a stimulus working to produce a given miraculous response implies the presence of an a priori pattern or network of principles that lurks beneath the surface of manifest events, mysteriously structuring their ebb and flow. (Stevenson 1995: 429)

This suggests that the human receptor of the narrative *is expected* to experience the telling and retelling of stories of wonder-working as a virtual equivalent of the miraculous event, and as such, infused with the same power to change reality, cognition, and the moral

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(the primary meaning of *jī* being "device or machine"), but it can also refer to mechanical power and to a hidden mechanism. The *yuán* (technically, a causal link or conditioning stimulus) defines a relationship that in this case operates to link the subject with the world of wonders and magic through the sacred object or sacred narrative.

status of the human being. It is an expectation, no real change need occur, other than a confirmatory experience, and any change that might occur will be, for the most part, an expected change. But, whether it is a confirmatory or a transformative experience, the reception and response is only possible because the narrative has a real-life equivalent in the reader's imaginary and because it creates or sustains a world for him. The psychological insight behind the device we call "miracle tales" is an understanding of this power of narrative, a power that mimics miraculous powers.

Transposing this model (or metaphor) to contemporary language, we may speak of a (not so surprising) correspondence between narrative and an inner human mechanism that instinctively orders experience in terms of human or human-like agents, and in terms of their powers and of predictable sequence of interactions between these agents (the narrative); furthermore, adding, from the Chinese metaphor, an important element to this mechanism: the interaction between audience and narrative (teaching, icon) is as much affective as it is cognitive (the Chinese "heart" is both mind and the seat of emotion). The correspondence takes place both in the imaginary (understood as a cognitive module) and in a body-mind response (the emotional validation of the virtual world present in the imaginary).

Needless to say, these observations lead in the direction of the contemporary concept of modules or mental systems of brain functioning, which is, arguably, one of the dominant model among cognitive scientists. I am only suggesting that in studying the materials under review in this article we should take note that, once we accept the existence of a "human-like agent module," we cannot lose sight of the fact that the "imaginary" agents that populate our view of human and superhuman reality have, by necessity, feelings, and exist in a narrative time in which people have emotional reactions. Furthermore, when they speak to us, they also seem to take for granted *our* agency and *our* affective nature, hence, when we communicate with them (in visions or through dramatic representation in narrative or ritual), in some way we communicate with our whole being: body as body, mind as mind, and body-mind as emotion.

I believe this may be what Scheible is trying to get at in her paper. The extensive passage from the *Gaṇḍavyūha* I have summarized above represents a traditional expression of this complex set of expectations where body, speech and ideation meet in a particular story line. Several factors meet, and not simply in our interpretation: a reader/receptor (represented by Sudhana), a culturally defined set of human and superhuman agents (Sudhana and the Night Goddess), interacting in a predictable event sequence (which is at the same time the wondrous event, the *vimokṣa*) populated by yet other embodied beings acting through time, and an expected cognitive and emotional response or responses (explicitly dictated by the narrative itself).

The basic structure of the model of brain systems can be described in a variety of ways, but, we can express it succinctly, following Pyysiäinen, in the simple formula: modules or procedures that organize experience either reflectively or reflexively (Pyysiäinen 2009: Appendix. 191). Religion does not belong to a particular module (Boyer 1995), rather, "categories and concepts used" in the domain of religious or ritual thought and practice "often have specific internal features and a complex relationship to everyday categorization and conceptualization" (Sørensen 2002: 181). Sacred narrative (*mythos* as story-telling, not *mythos à la* Cassirer or *à la* Eliade) is no exception to this rule; sacred narrative and miracle-tales straddle both modules, and, insofar as they also elicit a spectrum of affective reactions, generate something more than "categorization and conceptualization" – hence the power of religious narrative (as narrative and as religious evocation) – leading us to draw inferences and make predictions "on the basis of temporal relations and similarity" (Pyysiäinen 2009: Appendix, 191) in a magical world, but also on the basis of the intuition of emotion (vague as it may be). The process is more powerful than a simple inference or prediction, and therein is (am I allowed to say this?) the mystery and the magic of both the religious and the narrative imagination, both of which meet in miracle-tales generally, and in conventional stories of wonder-working, to create a hybrid that is more than the sum of its parts. This is in some ways comparable to the "magic" produced by the narratives of talk-therapy (Bernstein 2002; Brottman 2009), crossing the boundaries that

separate the memory as cognition and memory as affect and bodily response (Westen & Gabbard 2002).

Sacred narrative straddles both systems, and therein lies its function and its power. But stories are also the part of the mental systems that is most tightly bound to the mind's embodiment, i.e., affect, emotion sentiment. And, narratives about the miraculous touch that embodied level with greater force than any marvels of teaching – they make us feel, as it were, possessed. Thus, miracle-stories are not only conceptually different from doctrine, they are affectively different. Perhaps more powerful than "the marvel of teaching," but only if the latter is understood to be marvelous merely in a metaphorical sense. Yet, not all Buddhists would see it that way – after all, is there a human teacher who could teach as persuasively as the Buddha? Are his "pedagogical skills" not, in fact, more than human (even if we do not take into account his wonder-working powers and the suasive force they embody)? Once in the Mahāyāna, there is little room for doubt: buddhas and bodhisattvas are not just eloquent teachers (which they are, to boot), they are wonder-working teachers, and the distinction between teaching and wonder-working begins to collapse on itself.

We still need to understand how conviction and belief actually arise in a human being. We need to understand two elements of belief: suggestibility and surrender. These are not only elements of religious conviction, they are part and parcel of the experience of learning and teaching, of certainty and persuasion, as much as they are part of various social strategies to modulate and sooth doubt and anxiety, as well as strategies meant to shock and gain influence (Frank 1974, Galanter 1993). What makes the miracle persuasive? What makes the story feel so much like a miracle that we want to understand miracles through the stories? What may sometimes appear to be devious or deceptive, is, in the end mysterious, and (almost?) magical. Therein may lie the power of priests, doctors, politicians, psychoanalysts, and, (dare we say it?) teachers.[47]

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[47] Borrowing from Adam Phillips 2002.

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