

## Priming the lamp of *dhmma*

### The Buddha's miracles in the Pāli *Mahāvamsa*

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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."<sup>1</sup> 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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<sup>1</sup> Brown 1998: 26.

up and unmediated.<sup>2</sup> 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"<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> And paramount monk Buddhaghosa himself becomes the central character in a miraculous meeting of monks recounted in *Buddhaghosuppatti*.<sup>5</sup> 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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<sup>2</sup> 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.

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

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

<sup>5</sup> *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 *Mahāvamsa* 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.<sup>6</sup>

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?<sup>7</sup> 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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<sup>6</sup> The visits occur in the ninth month, fifth year, and eighth year after the Buddha's Enlightenment.

<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup>

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 Laṅkā, 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 *saṃvega* (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

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<sup>8</sup> Brown 1998: 30.

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,<sup>9</sup> from Laṅkā, filled with the *yakkhas*, the *yakkhas* must (first) be driven out.<sup>10</sup>

Even before the Buddha visits the island, the reach (and very image) of his influence (*sāsana*)<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup> The expected

<sup>9</sup> Wilhelm Geiger translates *sāsanujjotanaṭṭhānaṃ* 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.

<sup>10</sup> *Mahāvaṃsa* 1.20: *Sāsanujjotanaṭṭhānaṃ Laṅkā ñātā jinena hi / yakkhapuññāya Laṅkāya yakkhā nibbāsiyā ti ca //*

<sup>11</sup> *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.

<sup>12</sup> “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 *dhamma* 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 *saṃvega* 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 (*saṃvega*) 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.<sup>13</sup>

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

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ligions and are limited in forms. There are, of course, many interesting explanations as to which miracles are performed and why, but in the most fundamental way it is a matter that individuals and deities perform miracles that are meaningful, practical, and useful rather than willful and arbitrary. Thus, for example, the Buddha and his monks flew through the air in large part because the Buddha and the *saṅgha* were teachers who were required to be in many places to spread the *dharma* and serve as a wide field for merit making.” Brown 1998: 30.

<sup>13</sup> *Mahāvamsa* 1:

- 3 *Vajjitam tehi dosehi sukhaggahaṇadhāraṇaṃ  
pasādasaṃvegakaraṃ sutīto ca upāgatam*
- 4 *Pasādajanake thāne tathā saṃvegakāraṃ  
janayantā pasādaṃ ca saṃvegaṃ ca suṇātha taṃ*

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.”<sup>14</sup>

The cultivation of *saṃvega* and *pasāda* is considered to have implications not just for the evolving emotional states 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.<sup>15</sup>

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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<sup>14</sup> *Sujanappasādasamvegatthāya kate*

<sup>15</sup> Rotman 2003: 557. Kevin Trainor (1997: 167–171) also discusses the motive to act based on the feelings of *pasāda* aroused by seeing the relics of the Buddha perform miracles.

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.

*Samvega*, 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.<sup>16</sup>

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.<sup>17</sup> These two emotional qualities are employed in a sequential

<sup>16</sup> Collins 1998: 593, n. 2.

<sup>17</sup> To be “religiously moved” in this context is no mere abstraction. I agree with Steven Berkwitz’s assessment of the pragmatic consequences of the



way in the *Mahāvamsa* to heighten the religious effect. The shock of *saṃvega* 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 “*saṃvega*, 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.”<sup>18</sup> 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 *saṃvega*, 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 *saṃvega* 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.

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heightening of one’s emotional states by the text. Stemming from his work on the *Sinhala Thūpavamsa*, 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.

<sup>18</sup> Heim 2003: 546. Heim also notes that it “is a tool for the Tathāgata to stir up religious motivation in those mired in complacency and comfort.” *Ibid.* 547.

## 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.<sup>19</sup>

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

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<sup>19</sup> *Mahāvamsa* 1:

- 24 *Mahiyaṅgaṇathūpassa thāne vehāyasaṃ thito*  
*Vuṭṭhivātandhakārādiṃ tesam saṃvejanaṃ akā*
- 25 *Te bhayaṭṭābhayaṃ yakkhā āyācuṃ abhayaṃ jinaṃ*  
*jino abhayado āha yakkhe te ’tibhayaṭṭite*
- 26 *Yakkhā bhayaṃ vo dukkhaṃ ca harissāmi idaṃ ahaṃ*  
*tumhe nisajjaṭṭhānanṃ me samaggā detha me idha*
- 28 *Bhayaṃ sītaṃ tamaṃ tesam hantvā taṃdinnabhūmiyaṃ*  
*Cammakhaṇḍaṃ attharivā tathāsīno jino tato*

his superpowers, the Buddha draws a neighboring, pleasant island<sup>20</sup> near, and placing the *yakkhas* on it, he thus “made this island worthy of men.”<sup>21</sup> After expelling the *yakkhas*, the Buddha returns to his prior location in Uruvela. Laṅkā is cleared of the *yakkhas*, 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 *Dīpavaṃsa*, where the Buddha’s magical manipulation of darkness and storm is slightly more expanded: “The man, standing like a *yakkha* 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.”<sup>22</sup> It seems significant that the Buddha is mistaken by the *yakkhas* as one of their own kind. He most decidedly is not; he is the Buddha, while the *yakkhas* are unworthy of even entering the path toward Buddhahood, according to this vignette. The darkness terrifies the *yakkhas*; 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 *yakkhas*. 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.<sup>23</sup>

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

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<sup>20</sup> *Giridīpaṃ...rammaṃ*

<sup>21</sup> *Mahāvaṃsa* 1.43: *Evaṃ dīpaṃ imaṃ katvā manussāraham issaro...*

<sup>22</sup> *Dīpavaṃsa* I.54: *Ṭhīto naro iddhi vikubbamāno yakkho va mahiddhi mahānubhāvo khaṇiyam ghanā meghasahassadhārā pavassati sītalavātaduddini //*

<sup>23</sup> *Dīpavaṃsa* I.58–59: *Ṭhīte majjhantike kāle gimhānaṃ suriyo yathā / evaṃ yakkhānaṃ ātāpo kāye ṭhapita dāruṇaṃ // Yathā kappaparivaṭṭe catusuriyātaṇṇaṃ / evaṃ nisīdane satthu tejo hoti tatuttari //*

Buddha uses heat to help him purge the land of unwanted *yakkhas*, 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.<sup>24</sup>

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*'

<sup>24</sup> *Mahāvamsa* 1:

- 58 *Samgāmamajjhe ākāse nisinno tattha nāyako  
tamaṃ tamonudo tesaṃ nāgānaṃ bhiṃsanaṃ akā*
- 59 *Assāsento bhayaṭṭe te ālokaṃ pavidhamsayi  
te disvā sugataṃ tuṭṭhā pāde vandimsu satthuno*
- 60 *Tesaṃ dhammaṃ adeseṣi sāmaggikaraṇaṃ jino  
ubho pi te paṭitā taṃ pallaṅkaṃ munino aduṃ*

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 (*sudīpaṃ*) three times, and therefore [or: through him] this island (*Dīpo...ayaṃ*), radiant with the light [or: lamp] of the *dhamma* (*dhammadīpāvabhāsī*) became highly respected by (all) good people.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>25</sup> *Mahāvamsa* 1.84:

*Evaṃ Laṅkāya nātho hitam amītamatī āyatiṃ pekkhamāno  
tasmīṃ kālamhi Laṅkāsurabhujagagaṇādīnam atthaṃ ca passam  
āgā tikkhattum etaṃ ativīpuladāyo lokadīpo sudīpaṃ  
dīpo tenāyam āsi sūjanabahumato dhammadīpāvabhāsīti*

Translation in Collins 1998: 598.

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...ayaṃ/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 *avabhāsi* (*ava* + *bhāsi*) 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 chiasmic 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 chiasmic structure at play that justifies my argument about the emotional aims (and concomitant ethical transformations and behaviors).

*Dhammadīpa*<sup>26</sup> 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.”<sup>27</sup> 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-

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<sup>26</sup> 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).

<sup>27</sup> Collins 1998: 599, n. 17.

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;<sup>28</sup> 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 (*sudīpaṃ*), namely an island that has been primed to receive the pervasive and

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<sup>28</sup> "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 (*saṃvega*) 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.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> 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 gleaned 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 laticifolia*, or sesamum-oil (34.55–56), or camphor-oil (85.41, 89.43). The terrace of Duṭṭhagāmaṇī’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.



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