

Arts of Asia Lecture Series Fall 2011
The Arts of South Asia & the Islamic World: Beliefs Made Visible

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“The Miraculous Buddha in South and Southeast Asian Art”

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The Buddha is often said to have been a teacher. His teachings are described as rational and given without a reference to a god. Where then would the role of the miraculous fit with the Buddha and his teachings?

Section One:

The lecture is divided into three sections. The first section looks at the life and past lives (jatas) of the Buddha in South and Southeast Asian art and texts. Miracles are found to have tremendous importance from the earliest art and texts (ca. 2nd c. BCE). The miracles depicted in art can be divided into two categories: those that are part of the events of the life stories and those that the Buddha performs himself. It is seen that the Buddha lived in a miraculous world, filled with gods and super beings. The Buddha performs miracles to defeat other teachers. We will look at two that were the most common: the miracles at Sravasti and the miracle of subduing the fire-breathing cobra. These miracles include levitating into the air, producing a mango tree from a seed, duplicating himself, and producing fire to defeat the poisonous cobra. There is nothing in the art to argue that the Buddha was a rational teacher with no belief in gods.

Section Two:

The second section of the lecture turns toward considering how worshipers might have considered the miracles of the Buddha. Given the lack of historical sources for South Asian Buddhism, and the impossibility of proposing a single type of worshipper among the millions of different worshippers over a two-thousand year period, we will consider worshippers in Thailand where worship continues up until the present on which we can focus. In general, worship is directed toward an icon, not toward the Buddha in any narrative context. Buddha images can and do perform miracles, and we will look at the famous Emerald Buddha in Bangkok to see what miracles he performs. We find that it is the Buddha as an icon, as an object, that is the producer of miracles for worshippers. The Buddha icon does not perform the miracles of the Buddha as in the life-story narratives. The icons have their own identities, personalities, and miracles. Their miraculous power is not related to the Buddha's narrative.

Section Three:

The Buddha Sakyamuni (the Buddha of our historic period) was a human being. The Hindu gods, like Shiva and Vishnu, were not human beings, but deities, who sometimes took

human shape for our benefit. Thus the Buddha was always depicted in the form of a man, with two arms, and never shown with multiple body parts. There was always a tension, however, between the Buddha as man and as god. His godly nature was shown with the miracles he produced, and as Buddhism developed, by the creation of many fierce deities (with multiple body parts) who were his assistants and later his substitutes, as is seen in Tibetan Buddhism.

In this section I return to the earliest visual depictions of the Buddha's performing the miracles shown in the first section. These examples from Bharhut (ca. 100 BCE) and Sanchi (ca. 50BCE-50CE) are probably earlier than any textual narratives, and are the closest we might come to the Buddha's miraculous nature. Here I am struck by the similarity of the key miracles to the magic tricks that are performed by Indian magicians up until today: levitation, the mango tree creation, and snake charming. I end with a suggestion that the Buddha might have used magic tricks to persuade in his teaching, tricks that became the key miracles in his visual and textual narrative.

Bibliography:

Section One:

There are literally hundreds of sources for illustrations of the Buddha's life stories and jatakas. For purposes of this lecture I suggest that you take time to look at illustrations of jataka and life scenes. Perhaps the best approach would be to look at examples from a single site. Here are the key sites. Choose a reference from the Asian Art Museum library and look carefully at the illustrated examples:

Bharhut (ca. 100BCE)

Sanchi, Stupa 1 (ca. 50BCE-50CE)

Gandhara (ca. 1st-5th c. CE)

Amaravati and Nagarjunakonda (ca. 1st BCE-4th c CE)

Section Two:

Robert Brown. "Expected Miracles: The Unsurprisingly Miraculous Nature of Images and Relics." In Images, Miracles, and Authority in Asian Religious Traditions. Ed. Richard Davis. Boulder: Westview Press, 1998.

Robert Brown. "The Miraculous Buddha Images: Portrait, God, or Object?" In Images, Miracles, and Authority in Asian Religious Traditions. Ed. Richard Davis. Boulder: Westview Press, 1998.

Section Three:

Peter Lamont. Rise of the Indian Rope Trick: How a Spectacular Hoax Became History. 2004.

Lee Siegel. Net of Magic: Wonder and Deception in India. Chicago, 1991.