

Eye on Religion: Miracles in the Chinese Buddhist Tradition

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Books on Buddhism for general readers rarely mention miracles. Instead, the emphasis is usually on the life of the Buddha, his teachings, and the monastic order, the so-called “Three Treasures.” This is a heritage left by the European scholars who first became interested in Buddhism in the 19th century. Take the example of T.W. Rhys Davids, who founded the Pali Text Society in 1886 in England, and his wife Caroline A.F. Rhys Davids, who was its president. Steeped in Enlightenment values, they favored the Theravada Buddhist tradition, which has been practiced in Sri Lanka and southeast Asia, and its canonical language is Pali. They presented Buddhism as primarily a rational and ethical teaching, sharing similarities with Protestant Christianity. In contrast, they gave short shrift to the Mahayana Buddhist tradition of Tibet and East Asia because of its emphasis on the buddhas and bodhisattvas, who act as saviors for the faithful. They put more emphasis on Buddhist ethics than its rich mythology.

But this is contrary to what Buddhists themselves believe. The life of Buddha is full of miracles. Eight events isolated from his life are called “great” miracles. They are his birth, enlightenment, first sermon, passing away or nirvana, as well as four other events at which he showed his supernatural powers to demonstrate the truth of his teaching. The places where the eight events took place came to be celebrated as the eight pilgrimage sites. For instance, in Lumbini, it is said that he emerged from under his mother’s right side instead of the normal birth channel. The infant immediately took seven steps and declared, “I am born for enlightenment for the benefit of the world; this is my last birth in the world.” Two streams of water—one hot and one cold—poured forth from the sky and fell on his head. The earth trembled and from the cloudless sky a shower perfumed with sandalwood, along with blue and red lotuses, fell. At Bodhgaya, during the night before his enlightenment, there was the famous story of Buddha’s defeat of Mara, the Buddhist Satan. When Mara’s demonic army attacked the Buddha, the rocks, trees, and axes that were discharged rose into the sky and remained suspended in midair. When a blazing log as large as

The life of Buddha is full of miracles.

a mountain was hurled at the Buddha, as soon as it was thrown, it hung suspended in the sky and burst into a hundred fragments through his magical power.¹

Another group of miracles performed by the Buddha concern his teaching career. In India, there was a long tradition of gauging someone’s spiritual level by the supernormal powers (*siddhi*) he possessed. To make the audience willing to listen to him and thus benefiting from the Dharma, the Buddha found it necessary to exhibit his powers. Famous disciples were often recruited as a result of the demonstration. For instance, at Śravasti, he defeated the leaders of six heretical sects in front of the king in debate. To celebrate his victory, he performed the Twin Miracle or the Miracle of the Pairs. He levitated into the air, producing alternating streams of water and fire from different parts of his body. He also created multiple images of himself and had them preach the Dharma. These miracles were frequently depicted in stupas or memorial mounds.²

Belief in miracles has similarly been an integral part of the lives of devotees in other parts of the Buddhist world. I would use examples from the Chinese Buddhist tradition.

Here, instead of using miracles to demonstrate the extraordinary nature of the Buddha as we read above, writers of the miracle stories are more interested in testifying to the efficacy of Buddhist deities in saving humankind from suffering.

I begin with a story recorded by a Buddhist writer about 1500 years ago. Fu Liang, 374–426, the compiler of this earliest collection of seven miracle stories about the Buddhist savior deity known as Guanyin or Kuangshiyin (as the name appears in the story below), came from the elite educated class. He served as a government official, reaching the position of president of the Department of the Affairs of State under Liu Song. (420–479). He was a scholar of Confucian classics, but like many of his contemporaries, he was also attracted to Buddhism, which was introduced into China some three hundred years earlier from India:

Monk Fayi lived in the mountains and loved to study. He became ill but continued to work hard, and the illness got worse. He sincerely called on Kuanshiyin. Several days went by like this. One day he took a nap during the daytime and dreamt a monk come to visit him to cure him. He cut open Fayi’s chest and stomach and washed his intestines, which were all knotted together and looked very dirty. After washing them, the monk stuffed them back into the body and told Fayi, “Your illness is now cured.” Upon waking up, he felt relieved of any illness and returned to his former self. He lived on Mt. Bao in Shining (in present-day Zhejiang) in 372, and my father used to visit him. He liked to tell this story, and my father always felt great respect toward him. The sutra says that

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the bodhisattva can appear in the form of a monk. I believe that what Fayi dreamt was a confirmation of this.³

The canonical scripture which provides the basis for the cult of Guanyin is the *Lotus Sutra*. It was translated into Chinese for the first time in 286 and was subsequently retranslated three more times. It is by far the most popular Buddhist scripture, not only in China but also in all of East Asia. One of the chapters, named the “Universal Gateway,” is devoted to Guanyin. The bodhisattva promises to deliver the believer from the “three poisons” (ignorance, greed, and hatred, which bind us to the cycle of rebirth) and various perils experienced by people in daily lives, such as being burned by fire, drowned in water, harmed by bandits, wrongly imprisoned, and facing execution and so on. Guanyin will save one as soon as the faithful calls his name with single-minded sincerity. It is no wonder that this scripture enjoyed prompt and enthusiastic reception. Although the curing of disease is not mentioned in the text, following the spread of the cult of Guanyin, this, as well as other miraculous happenings, came to be attributed to his divine intervention.

The collection and dissemination of miracle stories have remained one of the most effective ways to inspire and sustain people’s faith in this savior. Anyone who visits a temple in Taiwan, Hong Kong, or even Mainland China can find pamphlets and books on the side tables or stacked on bookshelves along the walls of the main hall. Collections of stories about Guanyin’s miraculous responses feature prominently.

When I did research on the cult of Guanyin, I visited different holy sites in China connected with this compassionate deity. I interviewed pilgrims on Putuo Island, the most important pilgrimage center, in March 1987. When I asked if they knew of any stories about Guanyin’s response either to their own prayers or somebody else’s, the reply was invariably affirmative. For example, a young woman of 24 came with her mother, a retired nurse of 49, from Shanghai to fulfill a vow. Two years earlier, the mother had developed cancer of the intestines. When she was operated on, the cancer was very advanced and had spread. So the doctor sewed her up and predicted that she would die soon. The mother prayed to Guanyin for a whole year and vowed that if she should survive, she would come to Putuo to give thanks. Two years had passed and she was well, so the mother and daughter traveled to the island to offer thanks.

Another pilgrim I interviewed was a fifty-year-old fisherman from Ningpo, who had come to Putuo six times. He told me that originally he did not believe in Buddhism. But in 1977, his left little finger was bitten by a snake and the whole arm became paralyzed. He came to Shanghai and Beijing for a cure but had no success after spending 4,000 *yuan* (the exchange rate at the time was \$1–3 *yuan*). His mother then accompanied him to pray to Guanyin at the Buddha’s Peak, the temple situated on the highest point of the island. One month later, he had a dream in which he received a shot. It was so piercingly painful that he

jumped up in his sleep and woke his wife. Soon after, he could move his left arm. Believing that Guanyin had saved him, he came in 1979, the first year Putuo was reopened to the public after the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). He went up to the Buddha’s Peak following the Pilgrim’s Path, bowing every three steps to show his thankfulness.

I have called these stories “miracle tales,” for they share a common feature with miracles as understood in the Western religious traditions. According to the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, a miracle is “an extraordinary and astonishing happening that is attributed to the presence and action of an ultimate or divine power” (*Micropaedia* VI:927c). What happened to the individuals whose stories I have retold would undoubtedly have been viewed by them as nothing but extraordinary and astonishing. They would also attribute them to the divine power of Guanyin. The Chinese word for such stories, however, is *linggan*, “efficacious response,” or *lingyin*, “efficacious response,” or *yingyan*, “evidential manifestation.” All these expressions are derived from a world view that believes that everything is interrelated and interdependent. This belief is called *ganying*, which literally means “stimulus and response,” or “sympathetic resonance.” One scholar calls this “cosmic resonance” and explains this way: “According to this theory, things of the same category but in different cosmic realms were supposed to affect one another by virtue of a mutual sympathy, to resonate like properly attuned pitchpipes.”⁴ The relationship between the devotees and Guanyin is built on the theory of *kan-ying*: their prayer and calling of Guanyin’s name aloud is the initiating stimulus or trigger that, when it is sincere and desperate enough, is answered by Guanyin’s response. Guanyin does not act gratuitously. Human suppliants are linked to Guanyin through sincerity (*zheng*), for it is through sincerity that the mechanism of stimulus and response is set into motion. Although the deity was already known in India as capable of saving people from perils, and Buddhist scriptures proclaim this as a central message, the Chinese compilers of miracle tales nevertheless understood the miraculous workings through this indigenous epistemological lens, just as the persons who experienced the events did.

Both Confucian scholars and Buddhist biographers and theologians shared the same fascination with the idea of sympathetic resonance. It is, therefore, not surprising that both traditions produced voluminous bodies of miracle stories testifying its efficacy. Miracle stories were collected by both Buddhist monks and lay people. Popular miracle story collections served as sources for monastic biographies. *Biographies of Eminent Monks*, the earliest surviving work of this genre written in the 6th century, devoted one section to wonder-working monks. Later works record miracles wrought by relics, stupas, images, sutras in addition to divine monks.

To understand why the Chinese see Guanyin in this way, it may helpful to discuss briefly the Chinese views of the universe before the introduction of Buddhism into China. The

world in which human beings live is called, in Chinese, "Heaven and Earth" (*tiandi*). Unlike most other religions, Chinese religion does not have a creator god. On the contrary, as seen in the *Book of Changes (Yijing)*, one of the foundational Confucian classics and a divinatory handbook of great antiquity, Heaven and Earth is the origin of everything in the universe, including human beings. This creating and sustaining force, otherwise known as the Dao or the Way, is seen as good, and the highest goal of human life is to live in conformity to it. There is no god transcendent and separate from the world, and there is also no heaven outside of the universe to which human beings would go for refuge. According to the Confucian tradition, since human nature is bestowed by the Way, it is innately good. To follow our inborn moral nature and cultivate it to its fullest potential should be the goal of humankind. The spiritual force which fuels this self-transformation and self-realization is called "sincerity." When a person fully develops his or her nature through sincerity, he or she forms a trinity with Heaven and Earth. It is safe to say that this was the ultimate goal for Chinese who were educated in the literati tradition. But even for those who were not necessarily so educated, such as women and commoners, who also featured in the miracle stories, the belief in the cosmic power of sincerity was universal. The only difference is that this same spiritual force was directed toward making a contact with Guanyin, instead of one's own sagehood.

According to Mahayana Buddhism, all sentient beings are endowed with Buddha nature. There is no essential difference separating buddhas and bodhisattvas from ordinary people, the only distinction being that buddhas and bodhisattvas are those who are enlightened, whereas ordinary people have not achieved the same realization about the nature of reality. In this regard, there is congruence between Buddhist ontology and the indigenous Chinese one. Just as humankind can form a trinity with Heaven and Earth, they can also

become buddhas through the experience of enlightenment. Sincerity and good karma are hereby equally emphasized and skillfully harmonized.

In the 20th and 21st centuries, like people everywhere in the world, not all Chinese people hold the traditional world view. Western style education and the stress on science contributed to secularization and a general disenchantment with the miraculous. However, even the educated members of society often turn to buddhas and bodhisattvas for help when they face terminal illnesses. Chinese people are very open to different religions. There are a large number of Chinese Christians and Catholics. For a doctor and health professional, it is important to find out what the patient's religious beliefs are. If they are Buddhists, it is safe to say that they are all familiar with Guanyin's mercy and power. Next to Guanyin, the Amitabha Buddha is another very central object of faith. Amitabha Buddha vowed to save everyone and welcome him/her to go to his Western Paradise. In Taiwan and overseas Chinese communities, when someone is near death and no viable cure is possible, he/she is often visited by groups of volunteers who sit with the dying and chant the name of the Buddha together. Although the patient and his/her family hopes for a miracle, because of this belief in the Western Paradise, death is not the end but can be a new beginning.

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