

Rethinking Experience in Buddhism: Conversion and Miracle as “Family Resemblance” Features of Buddhist Experience

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And a science that includes self-knowledge and self-discovery is precisely the kind of knowledge that has the power to transform man himself.¹

R. Puligandla

In this paper, this two-part thesis will be defended: (i) that including the concept of conversion and the concept of miracle in the concept of experience would make for a more adequate view of experience in Buddhism than otherwise, one that shows a difference between Buddhist claims and scientific empirical claims [premises (1) through (10)]; (ii) that on the “family resemblance” idea of what it is to define experience, it turns out that conversion and miracle are two elements of a non-essentialist “family resemblance” definition of experience in Buddhism [premises (11) through (13)].

To begin with, it may be helpful to explain the work of Asia-centered philosophers.² The following remarks are not intended to state a fully developed philosophical methodology but only to outline the present task. Viewed structurally, one subset of Asian and Comparative Philosophy is Comparative Philosophy of Religion and one subset of that is Philosophy of Buddhist Religion.³ Basically, to do philosophy of Buddhist religion as viewed here, it is important to see the textual data of Buddhism “warts and all,” without any preconceived notion that the data will be amenable to classification as a Western “ism” such as “empiricism.”

The present approach stands in sharp contrast to approaches like Hegel’s wherein there is some overall synoptic vision of an architectonic structure which, when completed, will be revelatory of the structure of reality. Hegel does, to borrow P. F. Strawson’s (1959) term, “revisionary metaphysics.” For me, as for many in my generation, philosophy has the more modest goal of what Strawson calls “descriptive metaphysics.” But unlike him, as an Asia-centered philosopher, I do not stop with what he calls “our conceptual scheme” (read: the Anglo-American naturalistic mindset) as the limit of the description. Instead, I apply here the method of descriptive metaphysics to describe that part of the

early Buddhist conceptual scheme that has to do with miracles and conversion experience. In philosophizing, however, I do not owe any overall unreflective allegiance to Strawson or to Wittgenstein, but borrow selectively from their approaches while constructing my argument.⁴

Philosophers, even those of Buddhist religion, are like “under-laborers” whose job is to clear away the brush and rubbish of philosophical confusions and make way for perspicuous representation. Another way of saying this is to say that philosophy has primarily to do with understanding. Accordingly, my purpose in this paper is not to convert anyone to Buddhism or to convince anyone of the reality of miracles, but to work toward a greater understanding of how the ideas of conversion and miracle operate within the early Buddhist system of ideas. The reality of miracles may be seen in human life. It may also be the case that the notion of “objectivity” in the idea an “objective check” for miracles is unintelligible. (A problem is: can one could get clear on what this “objective check” would even be like; what exactly would one be denying in the claim of unintelligibility?) In any case, it is clear that the reality of miracles is seen in the sense language has for a person- in the connection between language games and forms of life. Far from trivializing religious belief, this approach shows how ethics and action form a seamless web.

As said by Wittgenstein, it is philosophy that shows the fly the way out of the fly-bottle. Philosophy begins with puzzlement. One philosophizes out of a sense of puzzlement, and through philosophical argument tries either to “solve” or “dissolve” a particular philosophical problem, thus either answering or dispelling a particular philosophical question. Within the Buddhist conceptual framework as interpreted by those whom A.D.P. Kalansuriya calls “Buddhist modernists,” the occurrence of miracles in conversion contexts is indeed puzzling.

“Buddhist modernists” was a term coined by a Sri Lankan philosophy professor, A.D.P. Kalansuriya, in his *A Philosophical Analysis of Buddhist Notions: The Buddha and Wittgenstein*, to indicate those who “have attempted to fuse some form of empirical or positivistic or scientific thesis into the Dhamma.” (Kalansuriya 1987, 7.) More generally, one can use “Buddhist modernism” as a term to indicate the perspectives of those who attempt to bring Buddhism “up-to-date” by either imposing what fits or ignoring anything that inconveniently does not fit into what is taken as the modern mindset. An example of this is the way in which many scholars of Pali Buddhism either ignore or do not take seriously conversion experiences and miracles in the Pali texts.⁵ This paper is a conceptual study and, as such, is distinct from the practice of Buddhism. However, as a brief aside (but one that connects to the work of our *festschrift* honoree) the job of philosophy as understood here parallels the main job of Buddhist practice which does not require one to advance some new theory of reality, but to see things as they really are, i.e., to see things apart from illusions and preconceptions,

mindfully, and with compassion. Not to see *different things*—novel objects in some strange metaphysical realm that only philosopher-kings or sages with a pipeline to absolute truth allegedly can see—but to see *things differently* is one of the similarities between the practice of philosophy and the practice of Buddhism.⁶

In terms of the ideas of our *festschrift* honoree Ramakrishna Puligandla, the Hindu parallel to the practice of Buddhism consists in “working on oneself,” that is, the practice of yoga through phenomenological attention to the data of one’s own consciousness. About yogic techniques, Puligandla (1981, 113-4) writes:

The second reason underlying the scientific psychologist’s dismissal of the psycho-physiological techniques of yoga as absurd and unscientific is that the study and practice of these techniques requires working on oneself, not on others—such as helpless prisoners, hapless soldiers, miserable inmates of mental asylums, and of course captive students. Given the subject matter of inquiry—the mental and the emotional—the only way to investigate these phenomena is to undertake the study of one’s own mental and emotional states. This is precisely what I mean by “working on oneself.” That is, the study and practice of yogic methods of inquiry requires self discipline. And since the scientific psychologist is used to doing science by working on others—by administering various kinds of tests and attaching “scientific instruments” to what he calls “subjects”—working on himself is something that does not even occur to him; further, given the way human beings are—whether scientists, philosophers, or laymen—our natural inclination is to find reasons for avoiding working on ourselves and instead busy ourselves in the name of science and objective inquiry with working on others, all the while deluding ourselves into thinking that working on others is the sure way to gain knowledge of the mental and the emotional.

Some twenty years after the writing of my *Rationality and Mind in Early Buddhism* (now in its third printing) it seems time for a fresh approach to the meaning of experience in Buddhism (Hoffman 1987). I propose to do this by focusing on conversion experiences and miracles reported in the *Sutta Pitaka*,⁷ for it seems to me that there one will find a meaning of experience in Buddhism that goes beyond all superficial comparisons with British empiricism. Hence I focus on miracles and conversion experience, mainly in particular *suttas* of early Buddhism, with a rough-and-ready characterization of “miracle” taken from Swinburne with some modification to fit the Asian material. I am taking a wide cross-cultural view of miracles, and hence I do not think that unmodified theocentric definitions of Swinburne and other like minded ones is useful for my purposes.⁸

When philosophers of religion sometimes discuss “miracles,” distinctions are usually made between several aspects of miracle, e.g., “miracle” as a violation of a law of nature, as an unrepeatable

event, and as any extraordinary event with religious significance. Often the definitions offered by philosophers of Christian religion are set in theistic terms. But the classic study of W. Norman Brown (1928, 29), *The Indian and the Christian Miracles of Walking on the Water*, shows that “there are several ways of crossing water magically that have been recognized in India” like

- a. with the help of a deity, first occurrence in the R̥gveda;
- b. by means of the magic power of truth, known long before the Christian era;
- c. by the psychic power of levitation, of which walking on water is the lower form, while flying through the air is the higher, also found before the Christian era;
- d. with the aid of the Buddha.

It is evident that only (a) has to do with G/god(s) so that any definition like Swinburne’s that makes reference to theism a necessary part of the definition of miracle fails to take into account data from Asian philosophy.⁹

W. Norman Brown (1928, 3) writes:

The act of walking on water is in India to be regarded merely as one of several ways of crossing water magically, all of which are frequently illustrated in the literature. The other ways are to walk through water that has magically been reduced in depth, and to fly across the water (or, to disappear and suddenly reappear across the water). These three ways are not marked off from one another by hard and fast divisions, but sometimes in variants of the same story are interchangeable. They come from a period of great antiquity, the earliest instances appearing in the R̥gveda and being therefore not later than 800 B.C., and are again all securely founded on native Indian metaphysical doctrines. These doctrines provide four means of accomplishing the miracle: first, religious act; second, the magic power of truth, being a specialized variant of the first; third, the psychic power of levitation; and fourth, the magic aid of the Buddha—this last means having affinities to the first and third.

It is noteworthy that Norman Brown does regard the Indian doctrines as metaphysical and that one of the texts he studies (*Mahāvagga* 1.20.16 of the *Vinaya Pitaka*) concerning Kassapa involves both miracle and conversion. On the East Gate of the *stupa* at Sanchi there is a bas-relief of Buddha on his promenade flying above the waves, pursued by a very anxious Kassapa in a boat with two assistants (Brown, 1928, 3, and frontispiece). In comparison to Buddha flying over water due to his psychic power (*abhiñña*) of psychokinesis, or power of mind over matter (called “levitation” in Brown’s study), other sages could *only* walk on water.

One might ask: what is the significance of the idea that there is an extraordinary event with religious significance or “miracle” in the *Angulimālasutta*? That there are miracle stories even in early Buddhism is a fact, but the importance of miracles was downplayed by intellectualistic interpreters of Early Buddhism such as K.N. Jayatilleke, who states in his *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge* that the miracle of instruction was not really a miracle. Perhaps so, if one accepts a definition as that of the philosopher of Christian religion Richard Swinburne, who states (1970, 1) that a miracle is “an event of an extraordinary kind, brought about by a god, and of religious significance.” Only, there is no need for Asia-centered philosophers to accept a definition of religion that would rule out its employment in reference to non-theistic religions. So, for the purpose of this paper I am going to modify Swinburne’s definition of “miracle” by dropping the theistic component of the definition.

But, at a deeper level, Jayatilleke may be right. Consider the following passage from Henapola Gunaratne (1985/1992, 125):

The Pali word *iddhi*, which we translate as “supernormal power,” literally means success or accomplishment. The main sense suggested by the word is an ability to perform feats which go against the normal course of natural events. For this reason the *iddhis* have sometimes been interpreted as supernatural or miraculous powers, but from the Buddhist standpoint these powers do not derive from any supernatural source but from a psychic potency based upon a superior understanding of the inner dynamics of nature. Thus they operate completely within the framework of the law of cause and effect and the “miracles” for which they are responsible remain entirely natural.

At issue here is the meaning of “nature” and “natural.” What of the “ontological status” of “miracle”? There are many different ways of looking at this that include things like representation of sensory deprivation, collective hallucination, literary narrative device, moment in the development of humankind’s religious consciousness, and a real event due to psychic power cultivated in meditation. Is miracle “natural” or a violation of a law of nature? One does not have to decide this big ontological question and become fixated on one or another description in order to show that the concept of miracle is important in the conceptual system of early Buddhism. In Buddhism, miracles nevertheless operate within the realms of birth, death, and re-birth that is *samsāra*, and are thus governed by causality.¹⁰ Buddhists may thus see the occurrence of miracles as natural while those outside their conceptual framework may not.

Although Ramakrishna Puligandla (1981, 122) writes of the phenomenological significance of yoga for understanding the range of human experience and not specifically of Buddhist meditation, a parallel point to the following can be made regarding Buddhist *jhānas* (levels of meditation), in

particular the fourth, which have psychic powers as by-products:

What is the reason for the outright denial of parapsychological phenomena by self-styled scientific psychologists and philosophers? The main reason, it seems to me, is that even if a single parapsychological phenomenon, such as telepathy or clairvoyance, is shown to be authentic, the entire edifice of scientific psychology, along with the fortress of reductionism, will crumble.

On inspection of the terms for “miracle” in Pali, it turns out that the concept of miracle in Pali is akin to the idea of any extraordinary or marvelous event.¹¹ *Patihariya* means “miracle,” but also striking, surprising, extraordinary, special, a marvel. Here no formal definition of “miracle” will be offered but only a working definition, for whether and how it is possible to construct a formal definition of “miracle” is a topic in its own right.¹² When one begins studying Buddhism with the epistemological concerns of Western philosophy uppermost in one’s mind, miracles are marginalized or even entirely ignored with the result that a one-sided view of early Buddhist epistemology results. Ultimately what will be shown here—the first part of the two-part thesis of this paper—is that including the concept of conversion and of miracle makes for a far more adequate view of experience in Buddhism than otherwise, one that shows a difference between Buddhist claims and scientific empirical claims.

To begin my argument:

- (1) *One view of experience in Buddhism has attempted to identify Buddhist claims with scientific empirical claims.*
 - (2) *Scientific empirical claims are constantly being refuted with the progress of science, and this is a basic difference between scientific empirical claims and Buddhist claims.*
 - (3) *Hence one cannot identify Buddhist claims with scientific empirical claims, and there remains a need for a more adequate view of experience in Buddhism than that at (1).*
- [by (1) and (2)]

To elaborate, for the purpose of having a more complete understanding of experience in Buddhism than comparisons with British empiricism would yield, one must consider both conversion experiences and miracles that occur prior to conversions in Pali Buddhist texts. Premise (2) means neither that there is no such thing as the history of Buddhism nor that Buddhist claims are static and without historical development, but only that the basic Buddhist claims in the Pali Nikāyas are not scientific ones in a

strong (i.e., “in principle falsifiable”) sense.

Perhaps few scholars today want to identify Buddhist claims with scientific claims the way K.N. Jayatilleke and David J. Kalupahana did in the 1960’s and 70’s respectively. Indeed, in his *Principles of Buddhist Psychology*, Kalupahana moved on to emphasize pragmatism rather than empiricism. Yet if this essentialism cannot be maintained, it means that there is room for an interpretation of experience in Buddhism that takes miracles into account. So far, few scholars emphasize miracles in early Buddhism as a consequence of what I have elsewhere (1982a, 1985) called “The Buddhist Empiricism Thesis.”

(4) *The statement at (3) neither means nor implies that Buddhist claims are not experientialist: it is clear that Buddha regarded his position as experientialist and neither as traditionalist nor as speculative-rationalist.*

Pre-Buddhist thinkers were of three major types: traditionalists (*anussavika*), rationalist metaphysicians (*takki* and *vimamsi*), and experientialists (Upadhyaya 1971, 199, 229). In the *Sangaravasutta* (*Majjhima Nikāya* 2:211) Buddha is depicted as distancing himself from the first two groups.¹³ There Buddha instead identifies himself with the third group in saying he is the one who knows truth by himself alone.¹⁴

But “experientialism” is not “empiricism.” Many religious paths are experientialist in the sense that their reflections are based on common experiences of human life, such as those of suffering and impermanence. In non-Buddhist traditions prayer to God plays a central role and involves personal experience of the Divine. Any philosophically robust sense of “empiricism” would, by contrast to experientialism of both theistic and non theistic varieties, include the idea that one would know what would count against that which is said to be known by experience. In other words, the “in principle [even if not always in practice] falsifiability” of the claims said to be empirical is required.

So, when the Buddhist doctrine is described as a “come and see” (*ehipassika*) doctrine, this is really an invitation to morality, concentration, and wisdom that is the eight fold worthy path. Walking this path (*magga, patiuada*) involves experiencing life in a new way: *ehipassika* is an invitation to experience the path and its fruits —not to see if anything can count against the *dhamma* (as if this were some sort of scientific experiment with a control group such that we would know what would have happened otherwise). There are at least three *Suttas* concerning Miracle: *Kevaddha*, *Angulimāla*, and *Patikaputta Suttas*.

(5) *In Kevaddhasutta Buddha claims that there are three kinds of miracle that he knows to occur on the basis of his own insight: miracles of psychic power, miracles of telepathy, and miracles of instruction, so that these three are part of*

the concept of experience in Buddhism.

In considering conversion experiences in Pali Buddhism, one can find interesting data in the *Kevaddhasutta* from the *Dīgha Nikāya*. One of the most significant things about the *Kevaddhasutta* for our present purpose is that it contains the three *patihariya*, that is, “striking”, miraculous, or wondrous “marvels that characterize a Buddha with regard to his teaching (i.e., superhuman power, mind reading, giving instruction).” (Rhys Davids and Stede 1966, 451.)

The *Kevaddhasutta* (*Dīgha Nikāya* 1.11) begins “Thus have I heard,” indicating that it was one recited by *bhāṇakas* (“reciters”).¹⁵ Here Buddha was staying at Nalanda in Pavarika’s mango grove. A householder, Kevaddha, asked Buddha to get a monk to perform some superhuman feats and miracles so that there would be more faith among residents of Nalanda. Initially Buddha rejected this request, saying that this procedure is not part of his preferred method of teaching *dhamma*. But after Kevaddha repeated his request the third time, Buddha begins to consider the request more seriously. Buddha claims that there are only three kinds of miracle that he knows to occur on the basis of his own insight: miracles of psychic power, miracles of telepathy, and miracles of instruction. Psychic power is explained as being one he becomes many, being many he becomes one, and traveling in the body to the Brahma world. But in that case one might accuse the monk of trickery performed by means of the Gandhara charm, so Buddha tends to dislike such miracles.

What about the miracle of telepathy? Someone might see a monk practice telepathy and be converted; then tell this to someone else who accuses the monk of using the Manika Charm. Seeing this danger, Buddha also expressed his dislike for this method of conversion. What of the miracle of instruction? Miracles of instruction use imperative language and focus attention on mental development, “Look at it this way, not that,” one might say. “Direct your mind this way, not that way” would be the type of instruction given in providing a miracle of instruction. Kevaddha is asked to suppose that a Tathāgata arises in the world, an *Arahant*, fully enlightened Buddha, endowed with wisdom and good conduct. A well-farer, knower of the worlds, incomparable trainer of men and gods, enlightened. Having realized by his own super-knowledge, he proclaims to this world with its *devas*, *Maras*, and *Brahmas*, its princes and people. He preaches the *dhamma*, which is lovely in beginning, middle and ending, both in spirit and letter. He displays the full, perfected and purified holy life. So, then, a disciple goes forth and practices *sīla*, he guards the sense doors and attains the four levels of meditation or *jhānas*, he attains various insights. He realizes the Four Noble Truths, the Path and the cessation of the defilements or *āsavas*, and he knows there is nothing further here. “That, Kevaddha, is the sort of thing called the miracle of instruction,” Buddha clarifies.

Buddha then tells Kevaddha that he has experienced these three types of miracles by his achievement of *abhiñña* or super-knowledge. Once a monk asked the question, “where do the four great elements (earth, water, fire, and air) cease without remainder?” Then that monk attained to such a state of mental concentration that the path of the *deva*-realms appeared. Then coming to the realm of the *devas* of the four great kings, he asked them the question. They said that they did not know and that the four great kings may know, so asked him to try there.

What follows in the text is a series of “passing the buck” scenarios in which each one confesses ignorance on the question, “where do the four great elements (earth, water, fire, and air) cease without remainder?” and each in turn tell the interlocutor to seek elsewhere: The kings said they do not know but maybe the thirty-three gods would know. They did not know but maybe Sakka, lord of the gods, may know, but he referred the question to the Yama *devas*, who in turn referred it to Suyama, son of the *devas*. Suyama in turn referred it to the Tusita *devas*, who referred it to Santusita, son of the *devas*, who referred it to Nimmanarati *devas*, who referred it to Paranimmita-Vasavatti *devas*. But they referred the question to Vasavatti, son of the *devas*, who in turn referred the question to the *devas* of Brahma’s retinue.

Finally, the monk went to them and was referred to Brahma, creator-god in this eon. But nobody knew when how and where Brahma will appear. But it was thought that when there is a light and radiance then Brahma will appear. Finally he asked Brahma, once, twice, and finally three times.

Then Brahma took the monk aside and told him that he should ask Buddha and not proceed in this round-about manner. So the monk came to Buddha and asked the question, “Where do the four great elements cease without remainder?” Buddha replied that once upon a time seafaring merchants launched a bird like the inquisitive monk that went all around in search of land and then came home. But the question is wrong: so try this, he advised: “where do earth, water, fire, and air find no footing? Where are dualities like long and short, name and form, altogether destroyed?” The answer is where consciousness is signless, boundless—with cessation of consciousness. Overall, in this *sutta*, one key concept is that of “miracle of instruction”: the occurrence of a perfected role-model monk who is seen by another who also becomes completely enlightened.

(6) *Some conversion experiences such as those in Angulimālasutta and Patikkasutta show that the concept of miracle is one of the family of features in the concept of experience in Buddhism.*

“Discourse with Angulimāla” (*Angulimālasutta, Majjhima Nikāya 2.97*)¹⁶ also begins, “Thus have I heard,” and in it Buddha is depicted as being near Sāvatti in the Jeta Grove in Anāthapindika’s

monastery. As the story unfolds, Buddha set out on a road controlled by a notorious, bloodthirsty bandit, Angulimāla, so named because he wore a garland of fingers. Usually people traveled this way only in large groups of twenty or thirty, and even then it was reputed to be dangerous to do so. Monks three times tried to discourage Gotama Buddha, but he went anyway. As he appeared in the vicinity of Angulimāla, the robber saw him and thought about killing him. So he began trailing Buddha with bow and arrow with intent to kill. However, Buddha with his psychic powers made it come about that Angulimāla was not able to catch up with him no matter how fast the bandit ran. Finally the Buddha stops and lets Angulimāla catch up with him. But by now Angulimāla's curiosity is aroused, and instead of killing him, he begins to question him about this feat. Buddha replies in figurative language saying that he stands still having renounced violence, whereas Angulimāla is unrestrained regarding taking life and is always moving.

Buddha's response thus shows the Buddhist value of quiescence and non-violence. After hearing Buddha's speech, Angulimāla throws away his sword and weapons in a chasm and decides to become a *bhikkhu* and follow the path of Buddha. Then the Buddha made his way to Savatthi with the newly ordained and now "Venerable Angulimāla" as his attendant. A big crowd complained to King Pasenadi about Angulimāla's presence. But Buddha asks the king, if Angulimāla really became a monk, then how would he be regarded? The king said he would extend the usual courtesies due to monks. Then the Buddha introduced the astonished King Pasenadi to the converted Angulimāla. At first the king was so afraid that his hair stood on end. Indeed, he found the change difficult to believe. But then the king, true to his word, offered to get the robes and medicines necessary for monastic life prepared for Angulimāla.

After telling Buddha of his seeing a woman in labor trying to give birth, Angulimāla expresses worry over what formula to use in giving the blessing. He cannot use a customary one of saying he had not taken life, so the baby is offered a blessing on new life. Then Buddha advises Angulimāla to give the woman a blessing on the unborn child saying that he had not deprived anything of life since being born of the Ariyan birth. Then the Venerable Angulimāla meditated, acquired super-knowledge, and became perfected.

Once some of the villagers of Sāvattthi beat up Angulimāla with clods, gravel, and sticks. Buddha saw Angulimāla all bloody with tattered clothes and encouraged him to endure it. Buddha proclaimed this to be the ripening of karma here and now for Angulimāla, for which otherwise he would have to suffer in *niraya* for thousands of years.

Then in private meditation Angulimāla made a solemn utterance about his conversion to *Ahimsaka* ("Harmless"), his new name. In this speech Angulimāla speaks of the importance of diligent effort in

achieving *dhamma* and attaining peace. He spoke of his conversion from harmful to harmless, and of eliminating rebirth. He declared the supremacy of the Path, experienced the three-fold knowledge, and the *sutta* ends there.

There are several important concepts in the *Angulimālasutta*. One is that of *Ahimsaka*: “Harmless,” the name of Angulimāla after his conversion. There is evident similarity between Buddhist teaching of the value of harmlessness and the Jaina emphasis on non-injury or non-harming. *Ahimsā* is a virtuous path also employed by Gandhi in his “holding fast to truth” or *satyāgraha*, the method of nonviolent resistance to unjust laws. Another important term of interest here is *bhavanetii*, the tether or cord that leads to rebirth, said here to have been removed by Angulimāla. The text does not specifically identify it as craving (*tanha*), but this seems a likely construal of the meaning. *Niraya* or “purgatory” is used in the specific Buddhist sense of a rebirth station (*gati*) in which one has to suffer until unskillful karma is worked off] at which time one has another rebirth in a different rebirth station. “Hell” as a translation for *niraya* connotes permanence and is thus too strong a term.

Reflection on this *sutta* brings up many interesting questions. In Buddhism there is the “miracle of instruction,” but what of reports of miracles such as the one above where Buddha keeps Angulimāla behind him no matter how fast he runs? Intellectualistic interpretations of Buddhism would hold that the texts speak dramatically, and are not factual reports of miracles in the sense of violation of laws of nature.¹⁷ In this *sutta*, is Angulimāla converted because of the “miracle” or because he heard *dhamma*? How exactly did Angulimāla’s conversion take place? Was it the miracle? Was it Buddha’s explaining of the cultural value of quiescence and non-violence? If psychic powers are not to be used to convert others, how is it that Buddha seems to be doing just that here?

One possibility (and the one that I favor) is to say that *miracle plays an attention-getting role*. Someone as bloody-minded as Angulimāla would not ordinarily stop to listen to a sermon on *dhamma*. So, although the miracle is not what changes his heart and mind—that role is left to *dhamma* itself—miracle does create a context in which he pays attention. Viewed this way, Buddha is seen as using “skill-in-means,” a pragmatic approach appropriate for a great psychological doctor. His medicine is *dhamma* but to get the patient to “listen up” and “take the medicine” it is sometimes necessary to arrest attention by wondrous means.

Jayatilleke (1998, 459) writes: “They are not considered miraculous but the result of the natural development of the mind in the Buddhist texts.” Notice that the Buddha in *Kevaddhasutta* never questions whether psychic powers and telepathy (also as instruction) occur—and the first two are certainly “miracles” in the general sense of “extraordinary events with religious significance,” as far as that goes. That they are in some sense miracles is built into Buddha’s own classification system of three

sorts of miracles in *Kevaddhasutta*. However, in Buddhist perspective, they are not miracles in the sense of “violation of laws of nature,” since from the Buddhist view they are natural events that occur when mind is cultivated at the level of the fourth *jhāna*. It is one thing to rightly point out that miracles are not to be used in order to bring about conversions, and quite another to suggest that miracles either do not occur in the Pali Buddhist texts or are unimportant when they do occur. Extraordinary events with religious significance (miracles in that sense) accompany the teaching of *dhamma* sometimes and condition an otherwise inattentive audience to pay careful attention. Such is the case of Angulimāla. Jayatilleke says in the same place that the miracle of instruction is really instruction without a miracle, but the truth of this claim of course depends on the sense of miracle intended. Clearly the miracle of instruction is an extraordinary event with religious significance, since it brought about a deep religious conversion, a complete change of life in Angulimāla.

In a third sutta under consideration, “Discourse about Patikaputta” in the *Dīgha Nikāya*, after “Thus have I heard” one finds Buddha staying among the Mallas, and going for alms to a small town, Anupiya. Because it was early, on the way he stopped to visit the wanderer Bhaggava-gotta who asked him to come in. Bhaggava reported that Sunakkhatta the Licchavi left the Order and asked Buddha if that story was true. Buddha said that Sunakkhatta came to him and said so, and proceeded to recount the exchange. Buddha clarified that there was neither a request to join, nor a statement of membership, so that Sunakkhatta should consider how far the fault is his own. Sunakkhatta replied that Buddha did not perform any miracles. But Buddha replied that he never promised miracles, nor was this a condition set by him.

Buddha further clarified through the process of question and answer that the purpose of his teaching is to lead whoever practices it to the total destruction of suffering. Then what good are miracles? Well, you do not teach the beginning of things, argued Sunakkhatta. Buddha then observed that Sunakkhatta had always before spoken very highly of Buddha, Doctrine, and Order. So, there will be those who say that Sunakkhatta was unable to follow the Path and left like one condemned to hell. Buddha continued with a story about staying among the Khulus at Uttaraka along with Sunakkhatta as an attendant.

Then Korakkhattiya the canine ascetic was going around on all fours. Buddha knew the mind of Sunakkhatta and told him that he was thinking the “dog man” a real Arhant ascetic. Buddha then predicted that he would die in seven days from indigestion and would be reborn in the Kalakanja *asuras*, the lowest station, and that his body after death will be just thrown on the grass in the cemetery. Go and ask if he knows his next rebirth station, said Buddha. So Sunakkhatta went to the canine ascetic, Korakkhattiya, and told him to be careful. But on the seventh day he died of indigestion anyway and

other beings appear, and he and they think he created them [just coincidence, not causation, is what is involved there]. Some ascetics and Brahmins believe that the beginning of things was due to corruption by pleasure: that people spent an excessive amount of time self-indulgently. Others believe it is because they are corrupted of mind, that people spent an excessive amount of time regarding each other with envy. Other ascetics and Brahmins believe that the beginning of things was due to mere chance. Also some say that Buddha and the monks are on the wrong track, because Buddha has said that whoever has attained the stage of deliverance called ‘the beautiful’ finds everything repulsive.” But in fact Buddha just says that these know the beautiful as the beautiful. Buddha ends by exhorting Bhaggava to put his trust in him, rather than to be of divided mind. Bhaggava agrees.

It is clear that miracles occur in this *sutta* for those on the path of *dhamma*. Sunakkhatta raises the dead who speaks and confirms Buddha’s prediction. More importantly, Buddha taught *dhamma* to liberate 84,000 beings, became fire and rose seven palm trees high, projected a beam of light double this which blazed and shed fragrance, then reappeared in the Gabled Hall in the Great Forest chastising Sunakkhatta for forgetting that he can and does perform miracles (in the sense of extraordinary events with religious significance). Hence it is safe to say that in *suttas* like the *Angulimāla* and *Patikka*, the concept of miracle is one of the family of features in the concept of experience in Buddhism.

(7) Some miracle experiences (e.g., in Angulimālasutta) are required for understanding the form of life in which the language game of dhamma makes sense and conversion occurs.

Kalansuriya in his study of Buddhism from a Wittgensteinian perspective (1987, 80-5) opposes what he calls “Buddhist modernists” who warp the *dhamma* by trying to force it into a Western framework (such as the empiricist, positivist, or scientific framework). Kalansuriya takes the approach that understanding *dhamma* in its own terms as a language-game and form of life is preferable to seeing it as amenable to a Western mold. In this he offers a valuable perspective, and in a similar way believes that anything like a full account of experience in Buddhism must take miracles into account. When one does so, the background within which conversion takes place becomes more readily intelligible. So in some cases such as that of *Angulimāla*, taking into account miracle experiences is really necessary for understanding both the narrative and the form of life to which it connects. The perspective of this paper is that conversion is a sort of transformation of consciousness and behavior from off the Path (*magga*) to on it, often preceded by miracles in the sense of extraordinary events with religious significance. Overall, Kalansuriya (1987) emphasizes the family of dhārmic notions forming what is an ethics-in-action soteriological path, so that the concept of rebirth is given an ethical interpretation. The

present perspective of focusing on miracles instead of rebirth affords another avenue to critique the approach of Buddhist modernists in addition to the ones Kalansuriya found. However, this paper on conversion and miracle does not argue for, or subscribe to, any general theory about the nature of religious belief.

For example, a view that seems compatible with Kalansuriya's view, that of Richard Braithwaite (1955), holds that religious expressions are moral ones used to subscribe to a behavior policy, and these expressions involve telling, but not asserting as fact, certain stories. As Wainwright (1978, 567-568 and sections # 899, 920, 929, 963) has documented, Braithwaite's view has been criticized by philosophers such as Austin, Ewing, Horsburgh, and Yandell. The difficulties that the entire discussion allows to surface go well beyond the scope of this paper, and so no claim is being made about Braithwaite's position here.

In most secondary source material about Buddhism, the emphasis is on enlightenment and not on conversion, and yet even Gotama Buddha had a conversion. When Buddha's life is discussed and the sights of old person, sick person, dead person, and renunciant are mentioned, the language typically used to describe what happens next is "the Great Renunciation." But this same transformation of consciousness could be rightly described as "conversion." Perhaps in an effort to make Buddhism appear as a special case of a verifiable system of belief scholars sometimes lose sight of the important role conversion plays in Buddhism, just as it does in other religious philosophies of the world.

In reading the texts it is evident that miracles are of great importance, these set the stage, dramatize the significance of *dhamma* and arrest attention. None of this implies that people are converted *on the basis that* a miracle occurred. Buddha is depicted as objecting to the superficiality of that approach, but the assertion that conversion is analogous to a "verification" in scientific thinking remains unproven. Observations of how things are turn out to be important in both religion and science, but there is no "control group" in religious thinking to show what would have happened otherwise. One does not know whether without the miracle to arrest him Angulimāla would have ever listened to Buddha *dhamma* and become harmless.

There is also a Contrasting *Sutta* with a Naturalistic, Non-miraculous Conversion Context.

(8) *The point at (6) is not to say that all conversion experiences require Miracle such that miracles are in all Buddhist experience, for clearly some conversion experiences (e.g., in the Aggi-Vacchagotta Sutra) show no miracles preceding a conversion.*

By way of contrast to the three previous *suttas* and their miracles and conversion stories, in a

fourth sutra, the “Discourse to Vacchagotta on Fire” (*Aggi-Vacchagotta Sutta, Majjhima Nikāya* 1:483), we find a naturalistic example.¹⁹ Here Vaccha understands the analogy of putting out a fire with eliminating the *asavas* (defilements). There is no miracle but he is converted by the *dhamma* talk and the logic of it against the background of an experiential example. The text reads:

“And suppose someone were to ask you, Vaccha, ‘This fire burning in front of you, dependent on what is it burning?’ Thus asked, how would you reply?”

“...I would reply, ‘This fire burning in front of me is burning dependent on grass & timber as its sustenance.’”

“If the fire burning in front of you were to go out, would you know that, ‘This fire burning in front of me has gone out?’”

“...yes...”

“And suppose someone were to ask you, ‘This fire that has gone out in front of you, in which direction from here has it gone? East? West? North? Or South?’ Thus asked, how would you reply?”

“That doesn’t apply, Master Gotama. Any fire burning dependent on a sustenance of grass and timber, being un nourished—from having consumed that sustenance and not being offered any other—is classified simply as ‘out’ (unbound).”

“Even so, Vaccha, any physical form by which one describing the *Tathāgata* would describe him: That the *Tathāgata* has abandoned, its root destroyed, like an uprooted palm tree, deprived of the conditions of existence, not destined for future arising. Freed from the classification of form, Vaccha, the *Tathāgata* is deep, boundless, hard to fathom, like the sea. ‘Reappears’ doesn’t apply. ‘Does not reappear’ doesn’t apply. ‘Both does & does not reappear’ doesn’t apply. ‘Neither reappears nor does not reappear’ doesn’t apply.”

(9) *As a corollary, although Aggi-Vacchagotta Sutta shows that miracles are not always required in Buddhist experience, it is evident from the Kevaddhasutta and both the Angulimālasutta and the Patikkasutta that miracles are indeed part of Buddhist experience.*

It is clear that not all *suttas* must have miracles in order for conversions to occur. However, enough has been said to show the use of miracle stories in conversion processes in the Pali *Nikāyas*. They cannot rightly be completely ignored in giving an account of experience in Buddhism.

(10) *Thus, including the concepts of conversion and miracles within the concept of experience in Buddhism (without assuming that miracles are required in all Buddhist experience) results in a view of experience in Buddhism that does not identify Buddhist claims with scientific empirical claims.*

It is now time to develop the second part of my thesis, namely, that on the “family resemblance” idea of what it is to define experience, it turns out that conversion and miracle are two such elements in a non-essentialist “family resemblance” definition of experience in Buddhism. Here to consider meaning and definition, Wittgenstein’s thought is applied, especially sections 66 and 67 of *Philosophical Investigations*. His target here—essentialist definition—is clear, and his alternative is reasonable and applicable.

(11) In order to avoid the inadmissible essentialist identification of Buddhist claims with scientific empirical claims that would lead one to an inadequate view of experience in Buddhism rejected at (3), one may more adequately employ a non-essentialist understanding of the meaning of “experience” in Buddhism using the ‘family resemblance’ idea of how to define general terms employed by Ludwig Wittgenstein. (Reference: Wittgenstein, PI # 67)

Wittgenstein (1953, 31-2) writes:

Consider for example the proceedings that we call “games.” I mean board-games, card games, ball-games, Olympic games, and so on. What is common to them all?—Don’t say: “There must be something common, or they would not be called ‘games’”—but *look and see* whether there is anything common to all.—For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to *all*, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that. To repeat: don’t think, but look!—Look for example at board-games, with their multifarious relationships. Now pass to card-games; here you find many correspondences with the first group, but many common features drop out, and others appear.

(12) On the “family resemblance” idea of what it is to define experience, it turns out that several elements comprise the thing defined without any one element necessarily being present in all instances of the type. (Reference: Wittgenstein, PI # 66)

Wittgenstein (1953, 32) writes:

I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than “family resemblances”; for the various resemblances between members of a family: build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, etc. etc. overlap and criss-cross in the same way.—And I shall say: ‘games’ form a family.

(13) Conversion and miracle are two of the family of features in the concept of experience in Buddhism.

As was seen above in looking at a range of Buddhist textual examples of conversion and miracle,

in order to have an adequate understanding of experience in Buddhism one must consider both conversion experiences and miracles prior to conversions in Pali Buddhist texts. A philosophical lesson is that the concept of miracle is significant for understanding the form of life in which the language game of hearing *dhamma* and subsequent conversion is played out.

Therefore, including both the concept of conversion and the concept of miracle in the concept of experience in Buddhism makes for a more adequate view of experience in Buddhism than otherwise, one that shows a difference between Buddhist claims and scientific empirical claims [(1) through (10)]; and on the “family resemblance” idea of what it is to define experience it turns out that conversion and miracle are two such elements in a non-essentialist “family resemblance” definition of experience in Buddhism [(11) through (13)].

Notes

1. Puligandla (1981, 133)

2. This paper was first presented at a Group Meeting of the Society for Asian and Comparative Philosophy at the American Academy of Religion annual meeting in Denver, November 19, 2001. A second version was presented at the Oriental Club of Philadelphia meeting of February 23, 2002. My thanks to those providing input at these meetings.

3. For more on method, see Hoffman (1991).

4. In fact Wittgenstein generally philosophized by going “away from metaphysics and back to description” whereas Strawson is happy to use the term “metaphysics” re-created for his own purpose.

5. At the level of popular Buddhist writing rather than Pali Buddhist exegesis, a more radical example of “Buddhist modernism” may be found in the work of Batchelor, who eliminates karma and rebirth as so much dispensable, primitive Asian belief. See Batchelor (1997).

6. Although a critic might say that the view from practice comment begs the question of how it is that things are, there is no neutral ground from which the critic’s view or some other view is itself impervious to criticism.

7. See Jayatilleke (1998, 324). Jayatilleke does not follow most translators who render relevant Pali terms as “miracle” or “wonder.”

8. See Yandell (1990) Ch. 15, “Miracles,” especially p. 315. Also Gaskin (1984, 137).

9. Above (b) relates to the “act of truth” discussed by Eugene Burlingame in his 1917 Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society article. Burlingame writes: “An Act of Truth is a formal declaration of fact,

accompanied by a command or resolution or prayer that the purpose of the agent shall be accomplished.” (p. 429) Burlingame studies this performative practice of making an act of truth both in terms of magic and in terms of narrative function.

10. Hamilton (2000) offers an interesting interpretation of *paticca—samuppāda* in the light of the *khandhas*.

11. Rhys Davids and Stede (1966, 451) has: *patihariya* striking, surprising extraordinary, special; wonder, miracle; on p. 613 for *vikubbana* has: miraculous transformation, change, assuming a different form by supernatural power; also *iddhi-vikubbana* “by psychic powers.”

12. It is an open philosophical question whether attempting to give a general philosophical account of the concept of miracle in some formal definition of a descriptive sort that would do duty cross—culturally for all sorts of phenomena is succumbing to the “craving for generality” (against which Wittgenstein warned). Here a working definition is employed, taking Swinburne’s view as a starting point and modifying it to suit the Buddhist context. Although it is not assumed here that a formal definition of miracle is impossible, one would have to see a case made out.

13. English translation: Horner (1957, 400).

14. It is an interesting question of philosophical interpretation whether the early Buddhist view may be rightly called anti-metaphysical. It is certainly anti-speculative, where speculation has nothing to do with liberation. But could the position be called “Experientalist Metaphysics” rather than “Speculative Metaphysics,” since both karma and rebirth are propounded which are metaphysical beliefs based on personal experience of life and meditation? On a minimalist view of Buddhism, it teaches only suffering and its eradication. However, as *dhamma* is developed in the *suttas*, many beliefs that are based on experience but nevertheless make non-falsifiable claims are expressed. In that sense these beliefs are non-empirical, and, in some cases because of the nature of the claims, metaphysical. *Dhamma* “puts together” experience in synoptic ways. In that sense *dhamma* includes theoretical organizing principles (such as *paticca-samuppada* or causality), the full statement of which in reference to realms such as *devaloka* (world of the gods) and *niraya* (purgatory) may have metaphysical presuppositions. To the extent that this world picture is expressed in the Buddhism of the *Sutta Pitaka* and is given in bits, some scholars doubt that there is any unitary world picture there. As an alternative to admitting metaphysical claims in accounting for causality in connection with rebirth, see Kalansuriya (1996, 139), who writes: “Our philosophical sketch by way of Wittgenstein’s techniques makes explicit the view that the word ‘rebirth’ in the Buddha’s ontology takes an exclusive ethical use.” More recently, Sue Hamilton (2000, 96) takes the view that “in spite of the development within Theravāda tradition of the psychological cosmology as described above, this metaphorical link between

meditative attainment and cosmological level is not found in any formally established form before the *Abhidhamma*.” Also, Richard F. Gombrich in The Gonda Lecture of 31 October 1997 doubts that the fully developed cosmology, although occurring in the Canon, can be ascribed to the Buddha himself (see Gombrich 1998).

15. For a detailed discussion of the “reciters” see Hoffman (1992).

16. English translation: Horner (1957, 284-292).

17. Violation of law of nature, unrepeatable event, or just any extraordinary event are some senses of “miracle” recognized in the philosophical literature on the topic.

18. This is reminiscent of splitting the skull into specifically seven pieces elsewhere, when the thunderbolt bearing *yakka* may be called in to enforce logical consistency. Two senses of “cannot” are thus operative: one “cannot” under threat of force as well as “cannot” under breach of rule violate non-contradiction. See Hoffman (1982b).

19. English translation: Horner (1957, 16247).