

## Significance of Miracles

Source: **Miracles**, the nature of supernatural and psychic powers. By Piya Tan © 2007, 2025<sup>1</sup>.

### 3.1 MIRACLES AND THE WISE

However, not everyone holds the idea that the existence of religious figures such as God or the Buddha need to be supported by the occurrence of miracles. Most thinking believers or practitioners are repelled by miraculous tales because they believe that these alleged miracles are somehow *unworthy of such holy figures*. As noted by **Hospers**:

If God wanted people to believe, why perform a few “parlour tricks” in a remote area where few people could witness them? Instead of healing a few people of their disease, why not cure everyone? Instead of a vision of the Virgin Mary at Fatima, Portugal, in 1917, why not put an end to the enormous slaughter of World War I, which was ravaging all around at that time [or keep it from starting]? Or, if this is tampering with people’s free will, why not do something that would save many human lives, such as stopping the earthquake in Lisbon that killed thirty thousand people [1755]<sup>2</sup> as they were gathered in their churches to worship (an example repeatedly cited by Voltaire in his *Candide*)? (1967: 454; 1997: 215)

Those who believe in miracles put themselves at a great disadvantage. Firstly, they are led by irrational influence, such as enthusiasm, wishful thinking, or sense of mission, even if these are driven by good intentions. Secondly, since they have not *themselves* directly experienced the miracles, they could at best accept it on faith. Thirdly, to believe in a miracle is to place our locus of control *outside* of ourselves, leaving us vulnerable to manipulation by those who have spun the miracle or the miracle story. All such influences are likely to undermine our critical faculties.

### 3.2 THE USES OF MIRACLES

Even today, many people are quick to accept as a “miracle”—even, or especially, if it goes against probabilities—when they perceive it as working *in their favour*. Hundreds died in a plane crash, and only a few survived. These survivors and their families would say, “It’s a miracle!” What about those who perished and their families who are burdened with painful losses? Conversely, what if everyone survives a plane crash, except one. The family of that one dead would not say, “It’s a miracle!” Indeed, it would be very unusual that so many survived such a disaster at such minimal loss. Would the family of the dead say, “It’s a miracle that so many survived!”

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.themindingcentre.org/dharmafarer/wp-content/uploads/27.5a-Miracles-piya.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> As a result of such a catastrophe, many intellectuals in Europe then were disillusioned or troubled by the notion of a loving creator: see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1755\\_Lisbon\\_earthquake](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1755_Lisbon_earthquake). British naturalist, **David Attenborough**, in response to hate mails from creationists for not crediting God in his documentaries, explains, “They always mean beautiful things like hummingbirds. I always reply by saying that I think of a little child in east Africa with a worm burrowing through his eyeball. The worm cannot live in any other way, except by burrowing through eyeballs. I find that hard to reconcile with the notion of a divine and benevolent creator.” (“[Wild, wild life](#),” *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 Mar 2003. Attenborough also tells this story in numerous other interviews.) Attenborough went further in his opposition to *creationism*, saying it was “terrible” when it was taught alongside *evolution* as an alternative perspective. “It’s like saying that two and two equals four, but if you wish to believe it, it could also be five ... Evolution is not a theory; it is a fact, every bit as much as the historical fact that William the Conqueror landed in 1066.” <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/jan/27/david-attenborough-science>.

Some of the most selfish and deluded people are religious ones. They claim only their God's actions are miracles, but those of other religions as the work of the devil, or as insignificant events. The point is that it would not be a miracle unless it has a result that people desire. Miracle stories are often used by those who wish to dominate others, and muster power and wealth for themselves. The telling of such stories often empowers the tale-spinner in the eyes of gullible believers.<sup>3</sup>

One serious defect related to the belief in miracles—especially that only the miracles of one's religion is true—is that it makes believers religiously squinted, even blinded, so that *they fail to respond wholesomely to human suffering*. In the wake of the 2004 tsunami disaster, religious extremists in Indonesia, instead of helping the victims, thundered from their pulpits that the disaster was God's punishment for those who have strayed (especially women)! Regarding the hurricane Katrina destruction of New Orleans, Franklin Graham (son of the well-known 20<sup>th</sup>-century evangelist Billy Graham) declared that God had targeted the city because of its sinful reputation! The point is that such miracle-mongers clearly lack unconditional love.<sup>4</sup>

### 3.3 THE MEANING OF MIRACLES

A very significant point about miracles, as already noted [2.1], is that God-centred religions tend to ascribe them to God or his agents (divine and human)—in other words, to something beyond the human powers and understanding. In early Buddhism,<sup>5</sup> as we shall see here, explains a miracle simply as “an object of wonder” (*pāṭihāriya*) worked by an intelligent agent (human or otherwise) through psychic power (*iddhi*). In other words, early Buddhism, centuries before Christianity tried to appropriate the idea strictly for itself, accepts the fact that such wonders arise from highly concentrated mind. Despite this, early Buddhism does not regard such wonders as a true mark of divinity, spirituality or even moral virtue. Miracle-working is in fact defined amongst the mundane knowledges and powers. It still fetters us to the world [§6], and that there is *only one true miracle*—the miracle of “instruction” (*anusāsani*) which brings about liberation from evil [§7].

Another interesting point about biblical accounts of miracles is that each of these biblical miracles is mentioned *only once*, and *without any explanation of how they occur*.<sup>6</sup> All such miracles, however, are frequently mentioned in the early Suttas, and are well defined in pericopes (such as **the Sāmañña,phala Sutta**, D 2).<sup>7</sup> Many of these miracles, such as walking on water and transmutation of matter, are explainable by the *kaṣiṇa* meditation.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> For a Buddhist example, we have the case of the Chinese Chan master, Shénhuì (688-762), who fabricated stories of the Sixth Patriarch and Chan history (incl bowdlerizing the “Northern” school) to promote his own lineage: see **How Buddhism Became Chinese**, SD 40b (5.2).

<sup>4</sup> For a moving account, see Bart D Ehrman, *God's Problem: How the Bible fails to answer our most important question—why we suffer*, NY: HarperCollins, 2998. Ehrman began his religious life as a born-again Christian in the American South, but as his Bible knowledge deepened, he realized the Bible is not only rife with contradictions but has no answer for solving human suffering.

<sup>5</sup> In this study, we shall restrict ourselves to early Buddhism, ie the Buddha's own times up to about the 500 after-years, and the Pāli Canon. Later texts, esp those of the Mahāyāna and Tantrayāna, mostly take a different view of miracles and “regularly commend such miracles, particularly when said to be performed by the Buddha, as an appropriate means of demonstrating his unlimited powers and bringing beings to salvation.” (Oxford Ency of Buddhism: “Miracles”).

<sup>6</sup> Saying “God did it” is not an explanation, but merely a statement, like “my father has done it,” without detailing how the miracle or event came about.

<sup>7</sup> D 2.89/1:77 f @ SD 8.10.

<sup>8</sup> See **Bhāvanā**, SD 15.1 (9.2).

Secondly, *a miracle is not a mark of spirituality*. Let's say if someone could turn water into oil (or some other miracle you can think of), and then the person declares, "Now believe what I say: *(Insert claim here)*!" The point is that what the person *does* and what he *says* here are not really related at all! Any connection is either based on the miracle-worker's delusion, or your own perception. If miracles (such as healing) do work, why show it off only to attract followers: why not heal the numerous sick and suffering in hospitals and hospices, where such "miracles" are badly needed? [7.5]

Another interesting point is that if the religious miracles claimed by the various religions (including Buddhism) are true, *how come we do not find a single independent historical record of any of them in other writings of those times?* One possible answer is that these "miracles" are *attributed* (by way of charisma)<sup>9</sup> to the religious teacher.

Most importantly, miracles, or more properly, the claim and belief in miracles, are really *the assertion of "lordship" or desire for power over others*. This is a desperate tool in a situation where other means of gaining power are unavailable or less effective. The best explanation we have here, insofar as we do see some kind of superhuman feat, is that *the human mind is capable of much more than we think*.

In early Buddhism, as stated in **the (Pāṭihāriya) Saṅgārava Sutta** (A 3.60), the greatest miracle is not that of psychic power, but of *education*.<sup>10</sup> The reason for this is that in the case of a miracle, "only the one who performs it, experiences it: it belongs only to the one who performs it. Indeed, this miracle seems like *it is related to the false dharma of illusion*" but in the case of "the miracle of education" (*anūsāsānī, pāṭihāriya*), much more people, even a whole culture, benefit from it.<sup>11</sup> [7.1]

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<sup>9</sup> See **The Teacher or the Teaching?** SD 3.14 & Piyasilo, *Charisma in Buddhism*, 1992h, available online: <https://www.themindingcentre.org/dharmafarer/wp-content/uploads/Piyasilo-1992h-Charisma-in-Buddhism.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> A 3.60.6c/1:172 @ SD 16.10.

<sup>11</sup> A 3.60.6c/1:172 @ SD 16.10.