

Fall 2025 Arts of Asia Lecture Series
It's Magic: Art and the Power of Transformation
Sponsored by the Society for Asian Art

The Buddha's Miracles and Magical Appearances

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Bharhut and Sanchi – two sites of early Buddhist art in India

Pala kingdom (approx. 750-1150) – kingdom in northeastern India (including present-day states of Bihar and West Bengal) that included the “holy lands” of Buddhism where the stories of the Buddha's life are set. Its artistic legacy was important in Southeast Asia, Nepal, and Tibet.

Theravada Buddhism – the school of Buddhism that for centuries has been (and still is) prevalent in Sri Lanka, Burma (Myanmar), Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia

“The Buddha” in this talk refers to Shakyamuni (Siddhartha Gautama), the “historical Buddha” (who may or may not have been historical). Other Buddhist schools may recognize additional buddhas such as Amitabha or Vairochana.

The “Eight Great Events” in the legendary story of the Buddha's life: *The Birth*, The Enlightenment, The First Sermon, The Monkey's Offering, *The Taming of the Elephant Nalagiri*, *The Descent from Indra's Heaven*, *The Miracle at Shravasti*, and The Death. (Those in italics involve miracles.) Note that all eight took place in different towns, all of which became pilgrimage sites. Note too that the “Eight Great Events” are somewhat different (though there is overlap) with the lists of “Eight Miracles” in some Buddhist texts. The “Eight Great Events” as a group are depicted much more frequently in art.

pratiharya (Sanskrit) or *patihariya* (Pali) – miracle, marvel, superhuman feat

- The “great miracle” (*mahapratiharya*) in which the Buddha projects multiples of himself
- The “twin miracle” (*yamakapratiharya*) in which the Buddha rises into the air and also emits fire and water from his body

The miracle of the Buddha overawing King Jambupati. In this story, which is known in Southeast Asia but (apparently) not in India, an arrogant king tries to flaunt his status over the Buddha. The Buddha creates a glorious city with a magnificent palace at its center and there he takes on the guise of a supreme king. He summons Jambupati to pay homage to him. Jambupati, humbled, does so. The Buddha favors him with a sermon and Jambupati becomes a disciple.

Trayastrimsha (Sanskrit) or Tavatimsa (Pali) – The Heaven of the “Thirty-three” Gods, ruled over by Indra; sometimes called “Indra’s Heaven.” This is where the Buddha miraculously ascends to in order to preach to his deceased mother, and then descends from (meanwhile “opening the worlds”).

“Opening (or revealing) the worlds” (Thai: *pōet lok*) – At the time of the Descent the Buddha makes it possible for the inhabitants of the heavens, the earth, and the hells to see each other.

Some towns where miracles are supposed to have taken place:

- Kapilavastu (Sanskrit) or Kapilavatthu (Pali)
- Samkashya (Sanskrit) or Sangkassa (Pali)
- Shravasti (Sanskrit) or Savatthi (Pali)

Suggested Readings:

Bopearachchi, Osmund, 2024. "Yamakaprātihārya or the ‘Twin Miracle,’” illustrated lecture available on YouTube. Can be found by searching on the title.

Fiordalis, David V. 2008. “Miracles and Superhuman Powers in South Asian Buddhist Literature.” PhD diss., University of Michigan. This is available online and can be found by searching on the title.

Lopez, Donald S. 2025. *The Buddha: Biography of a Myth*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Reynolds, Frank E., 1976. “The Many Lives of Buddha: A Study of Sacred Biography and Theravada Tradition,” in *The Biographical Process: Studies in the History and Psychology of Religion*. Edited by Frank Reynolds and Donald Capps, Mouton, The Hague.

Sasson, Vanessa R., and Kristin Scheible, eds. 2024. *The Buddha: A Storied Life*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press. See especially pp. 150-176, “The Buddha’s Career: Teachings and Miracles” by David Fiordalis.

Strong, John S., 2010. “The Triple Ladder at Saṃkāśya: Traditions about the Buddha’s Descent from Trayastrimśa Heaven.” In: *From Turfan to Ajanta: Festschrift for Dieter Schlingloff on the Occasion of his Eightieth Birthday*. Edited by Eli Franco and Monika Zin. Lumbini: LIRI. Pp. 967-78.

Williams, Joanna, 1975. “Sarnath Gupta Steles of the Buddha’s Life.” *Ars Orientalis*, Vol. 10 (1975), pp. 171-192