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BUKKYO DENDO KYOKAI  
Society for the Promotion of Buddhism

WORKSHOP

# BUDDHIST MIRACLES: NARRATIVE LITERATURE IN LIFE AND MEMORY

Udayana Image at Seiryōji, Kyoto. Taken from Hurvitz 1956, 5.

**4–5 April 2025**  
**Fri: 13h–17h; Sat: 10h–17h**  
**Akademischer Senat**  
**Main Building**  
**Edmund-Siemers-Allee 1**

ASIEN-AFRIKA-INSTITUT  
NUMATA ZENTRUM FÜR BUDDHISMUSKUNDE



Numata Zentrum  
für Buddhismuskunde



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## **Numata Center, Asien-Afrika-Institut, University of Hamburg two-day workshop on “Buddhist miracles: narrative literature in life and memory”, 4-5 April**

### **Introduction**

This two-day in-person workshop at the University of Hamburg will bring together various specialists on the miraculous in Asia (i.e. India, Tibet, Japan, China). The purpose of this workshop is to discuss the interplay between Buddhist narrative literature, material culture, and the religious communities they represent. Other topics will also be broached, such as divination practice and religious culture in Asia.

Across the many disparate places and cultures that were influenced by ‘Buddhist’ teachings and practices, the greatest ‘emissaries’ for this missionary religion were not the doctrines or rites associated to Buddhism, but those other ‘representatives’ that were present on the ground: the scriptures, the cult-objects, the holy structures, as well as the human (and superhuman) proponents of the tradition—merchants, monks, nuns, lay practitioners, deities, buddhas, etc. Their stories were recorded by various means in the narrative literature traditions of the Buddhist world: the jatakas, avadanas, miracle tales, apologues, biographies, histories, and more. Miraculous phenomena marked places, things, or people with a seal of authority by verifying their supernatural and sacred qualities via miracles. This was, in turn, confirmed by witnesses and recorded by authors and compilers for dissemination. In many ways, the miracles associated to these objects, places, or people, were just as important in their respective narrative traditions as the objects, places, or people themselves.

This workshop is interested in defining the contours of the ‘miraculous’ in Buddhist narrative literature as well as describing the various ways in which miracles are represented—and used—in stories related to cult-objects, sacred places and holy figures. Moreover, by studying narrative literature across the many traditions of the world, this workshop looks to investigate various facets of one of the most potent mediums for self-representation in the Buddhist tradition: narrative literature. Indeed, the experience of ‘Buddhism’ for most—people both past and present—is limited to more personal and localized encounters, while the broader contour of the tradition is evoked and lived through its stories. These stories are part of a larger project of worldmaking adopted by missionaries, authors, compilers, artists, and others attempting to represent their faith in an accessible format: one that was written, read, recited, sung, or otherwise committed to memory and performed. These stories constituted a network of meaningful religious representations while simultaneously projecting the self-conscious representations of a time and a religious community.

### **Program**

The seminar will be carried out over two days, or roughly 12 contact hours. The workshop will be a small-scale affair, involving approximately 8 scholars as well as attendees from the Asien-Afrika-Institut and from the Center for the Study of Manuscript Cultures here in Hamburg. More info on the venue forthcoming. Presentations will run for c. 30 minutes, followed by 15 minutes of discussion. There will be a lunch on Day two. Dinner will be provided for participants on both days.

Venue: TBA

#### Friday April 4, Day one

Some opening statements on what we mean by ‘miracles’ and their place in academic research on religion. This will be followed by topical presentations given by participants and discussion. Day 1 will start in the afternoon around 13:00 and will go on until 17:00.

#### Saturday April 5, Day two

Presentations and discussion will continue from the morning until the early afternoon. At the end of the workshop, there will be a summary of the workshop proceedings given by the organizer. Day two will start at 10:00 and ends around 17:00.

The following is a brief breakdown of the two-day workshop.

	<b>Friday April 4</b>		<b>Saturday April 5</b>
Tea break	1300-1330	Tea break	1000-1030
Introduction	1330-1415	Pres 4	1030-1115
Pres 1	1415-1500	Pres 5	1115-1200
Tea break	1500-1530	Lunch	1200-1400
Pres 2	1530-1615	Pres 6	1400-1445
Pres 3	1615-1700	Pres 7	1445-1530
Dinner	1830	Tea break	1530-1600
		Pres 8	1600-1645
		Conclusion	1645-c. 1700
		Dinner	1830



Udayana image at Seiryōji, Kyoto. Taken from Hurvitz 1956, 5

## Abstract and bios (alphabetical order)

**Jørn Borup**

### **Japanese Buddhist miracles**

Buddhism is (also) a religion of magic and miracles. 19<sup>th</sup> century ‘Protestant’ readings of canonical text Buddhism as a rational and almost scientific religion had impact on modern reform Buddhism, and examples of pre-modern teachings ridiculing ‘folkish’ ideas and practices as irrelevant for entering the proper soteriological path are easily identified throughout the Buddhist world. However, without narratives of miraculous monks, events, places and practices, Buddhism would never have succeeded in becoming a post-axial ‘world religion’.

In Japan, Buddhism was introduced and spread not least through tales of miracles. Esoteric traditions such as Shingon and Tendai incorporated religious virtuosi practicing rituals manipulating a cosmology full of supernatural agency. ‘This-worldly benefits’ (*genze riyaku*) received as health- or wealth-related gifts from otherworldly powers are often the main aim of Japanese religiosity. New Religious Movements (also Buddhist ones) often center around miraculous intervention in such enchanted worlds, and even officially magic-resisting traditions such as Jōdo shinshū accept practitioners to include belief and rituals involving manifestations of superhuman agency.

After discussing concepts and uses of ‘miracle’ (e.g. *reigen, kiseki, fushigi, myō*) this paper will describe some Japanese Buddhist religious traditions and their involvement with miraculous narratives, places, agency and practices. Ascetic traditions such as yamabushi and ritual pilgrimage related to Kōbō Daishi will be compared to new religious movements, and strategies of adapting or denouncing miracles within contemporary Buddhist institutions will be discussed before some final reflections on the category of ‘miracle’ in the general study of religion.

Jørn Borup, Ph.D., is an associate professor in the Department of the Study of Religion, Aarhus University. He has conducted research on Buddhism in Japan and in the West, focusing on topics such as lived religion, materiality, spirituality, secularization, migration and transcultural encounters. He is the author of *Japanese Rinzai Zen Buddhism: Myōshinji, a Living Religion* (Brill 2008) and articles for *Journal of Global Buddhism*, *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, *Japanese Religions* and *Journal of Religion in Japan*. His most recent book is *Decolonising the study of religion: Who owns Buddhism?* (Routledge 2023).

## **David Fiordalis**

### **Buddhist Miracles: A Literary Approach to Buddhist Literature**

The literary approach to Buddhist literature is one of the paths less taken in the modern study of Buddhism, influenced as it has been by historicist, doctrinal, and philological approaches. Yet the literary approach holds significant promise for understanding underappreciated elements of the tradition, such as the “wondrous” and “supernatural” elements undeniably found throughout Buddhist literature, and how these elements fit into what might be described as a traditional Buddhist worldview. While not monolithic, such a traditional worldview (or worldviews) would have shaped—and also would have been shaped by—the storyworlds that are projected in and by traditional Buddhist literature, such as the dialogues of the Pali and Chinese Buddhist canons, the vinayas, the jātakas and avadānas, and so forth. This presentation will offer a few examples from Pali canonical literature to show what a literary approach can reveal about Buddhist literature, and specifically how the literature balances its discernable fantastic elements against its evident narrative realism. For “the real” and “the wondrous” are just as much “narrative categories” as they are “conceptual” or “philosophical” ones, and Buddhist literature, like religious literatures more generally, build a compelling storyworld and invite an imagined audience to identify this storyworld as the real world, thereby prompting readers to consider what it would mean for us, if buddhas and other superhuman beings, who can see, do, and know more than we can, were to exist in our world.

David Fiordalis is Associate Professor at Linfield University in Oregon, USA, and Research Editor at 84000: Translating the Words of the Buddha. His publications include a translation of the *Tathāgataḡuhyā* entitled *The Secrets of the Realized Ones*, published by 84000, and an edited volume on Buddhist philosophy as practice, *Buddhist Spiritual Practices*, published by Mangalam Press. He received his doctorate from the University of Michigan under the supervision of Luis Gómez.

## **Oliver Hargrave**

### **Liánlǐ and Śāla: Strange Trees and their Names in Medieval Chinese Buddhism**

Included in many of the official histories of Early and Medieval China are records of auspicious signs being presented to court. One of these named signs is that of intertwining trees (called *liánlǐ* 連理 in Chinese), which, when they were interpreted at all, were described as being signs of the peaceful rule of the reigning emperor. These intertwining trees were also recorded as appearing in Buddhist temples, but then were usually connected to stories of the life of the Buddha and to Sanskrit-derived Buddhist terminology. This paper will examine these strange trees and how they were connected to secular and religious authorities, and specifically to how Chinese Buddhists shifted their meaning from reflecting the authority of the Chinese emperor to an embodiment of the foreign teachings of Buddhism. Part of how they did this was by connecting the phenomenon with names for important trees in Buddhism like the śāla tree. This illustrates the often fraught status of Buddhism in China and the strategies Chinese Buddhists developed to both show that the dharma could be heard in China, and that the truth of the miraculous was ultimately Buddhist.

Dr Oliver Hargrave is Departmental Lecturer in Chinese at the University of Oxford, where he teaches Classical Chinese philosophy. He has degrees from SOAS and Oxford, and his DPhil research was on representations of strange trees in Early and Medieval China. He is interested in the intersection of human conceptions of the natural world with religion and philosophy. His upcoming project for the Needham Institute will be on understandings of rainbows in Chinese history.

## **Sylvie Hureau**

### **The supernatural in Sengyou's 僧祐 (445-518) work**

One of the factors that enabled Buddhism to take root and develop in Early Medieval China was the profusion of stories of miracles and prodigies. Extraordinary stories were compiled in collections, either thematic (on miracles due to the efficacy of a bodhisattva, for example) or general. The author of the *Gaoseng zhuan* 高僧傳 (Biographies of eminent monks), edited in the early sixth cent., dedicated one of the ten sections of his work to wonder-working monks, whose supernatural powers are akin to abhijñā. That said, the 'ordinary supernatural' is present in all the other sections of the book, and in a large number of biographies.

One of the monks I will be talking about is Sengyou 僧祐 (445-518), an active and influential monk in the southern capital Jiankang 建康 (modern Nanjing) during the Qi (479-502) and early Liang (502-559) dynasties. Sengyou is best known for the major works he composed, which are of fundamental importance for understanding the cultural, intellectual and religious history of the period. He compiled the *Hongming ji* 弘明集 (Collection for propagating the Buddhist path and shedding light on its doctrine), which sheds a most vivid and interesting light on the criticisms to which Buddhism was subjected in the centuries following its introduction into China. He compiled a compendium on the life of the Buddha Śākyamuni, his lineage and his family, *Shijia pu* 釋迦譜 (Genealogy of the Śākya clan). He was also the author of a series of catalogs of translations of Buddhist works, compiled with a critical and selective approach. He added translation documents (prefaces, postfaces, colophons) and biographies of monks. These are all included in his *Chu sanzang jiji* 出三藏記集 (Collected notes on the production of the tripiṭaka).

In short, Sengyou is known and appreciated for his contribution to historians of Buddhism, as his catalogs are the oldest preserved. Any study of the content of a text translated into Chinese in medieval times involves the study of its mention in Sengyou's work.

However, the rational point of view that prevails in the contemporary approach to Buddhist studies should not overshadow that Sengyou was not indifferent to the supernatural. My presentation will focus on the place of the supernatural in Sengyou's work. What was his perception of the supernatural and the miraculous? Was he at one and the same time a rigorous bibliographer, who was administering selection exams for monks, who lectured on the Buddhist discipline, and a convinced believer in the supernatural?

Sylvie Hureau is associate professor at the Ecole pratique des hautes études (EPHE-PSL) (<https://www.ephe.psl.eu/sylvie-hureau>). Her research is at the crossroads of the disciplines of history and historiography. She studies canonical biographical narratives for what they enable us to understand the general history, and sometimes the micro-history, of beliefs, cults and practices. She recently has particularly focused on the “making of” Buddhist knowledge in Early Medieval China.



## *Nelson Landry*

### ***Ganying* and *gantong*: miracles according to Daoxuan 道宣 (596-667)**

The concept of resonance has long been used in English language works to explain ancient Chinese views on causality. Briefly, resonance describes the cosmic symmetry and correlation between the seen realm, i.e. the world of humans and Nature, and the unseen realm. From time to time, strange phenomena would occur that did not fit into peoples' day-to-day epistemological categories, phenomena such as two trees growing intertwined in the wild or a light appearing in the heavens that sages had not noticed there before. These phenomena were seen as the manifestation of an instance of resonance between current human affairs and the cosmos. The expression that was usually used to describe such supernormal phenomena was "stimulus and response" (*ganying* 感應) because the actions of humans could move (*gan*) the cosmos to react (*ying*) and produce miracles and prodigies.

Like many of his contemporaries, the seventh-century monk Daoxuan 道宣 (596-667) believed in the legitimacy of miraculous phenomena. By his time, the above mentioned system of correlative thinking had already been profoundly influenced by Buddhist ideas of causality, which include the concept of karma and reincarnation, as well as a hell realm. Daoxuan was a prolific writer, composing some of the most impactful commentaries in China on the *Vinayas*, as well as many other works of apologetics and history. It is in his apologetics and history works that he elaborates on his concept of what constitutes a miracle. Although he perhaps was not actively trying to redefine the category of the "miraculous" in China, by the eleventh century, authors such as Zanning were writing about Daoxuan as the monk who marked the shift between the old category of *ganying* (as well as *shenyi* 神異) and this supposedly new category of *gantong* 感通. My presentation will investigate these different epistemological categories as they appear in the textual tradition. Daoxuan's commentaries may cast a light on what the medieval Chinese Buddhist community believed about miracles and supernormal phenomena, but we are better served looking at the influence that his terminological change impressed on his contemporaries as well as those authors and thinkers that followed him. I will in this talk offer a brief genealogy of the concept of *gantong* within the ever changing cultural landscape of medieval China. By looking at the place of *gantong*, and other close equivalents like *ganying*, we can learn a bit more about Daoxuan's own belief system as well as the beliefs of society at large.

Nelson Landry is a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Hamburg specializing in Chinese Buddhist social history. His interests revolve around the transmission of Buddhism to China during the Period of Disunion and early Tang dynasty miracle tale compilations. He is presently completing a monograph on the seventh-century monk Daoxuan and the collections of miracle tales and revelatory texts that he authored late in life.

## ***Nathalie Phillips***

### **Anomalies and Unpredictable Events in Heian Japan: Buddhist Efficacy in Times of Crisis**

Natural disasters, strange phenomena, epidemics, and disease were not random occurrences according to the prevalent explanatory models of the Heian period (794–1185). They were instead regarded as the direct outcome of human inadequacy and corruption, which had provoked a reaction from the sphere of transcendent agents and forces. As such, they may be regarded as the opposite of the manifestation of miracles, implying a form of critique or communication from affected entities, but, nevertheless, representing a demonstration of their power. However, since such disruptions were resolved by means of Buddhist ritual, depending on the preferred method of counteraction required by the agent, crises also presented prime opportunities for monks to display their prowess in producing ritual efficacy or, potentially also failing to do so, becoming objects of ridicule.

This paper seeks to shed light on the processes involved in creating meaning when inexplicable events posed a direct threat to the human realm. Based on diaries kept by courtiers and historical documents, an overview of the types of notions that were brought to bear on inexplicable circumstances will first be given. The aim is then to examine how Buddhist agents, institutions, and ritual specialists came together in situations of crisis and how they were involved in uncovering potential causes, voicing criticism, and restoring order.

Nathalie Phillips is currently a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Zurich, where she is involved in the SNSF research project “Time and Emotion in Medieval Japanese Literature”. She earned her MSt from the University of Oxford and her PhD from the University of Edinburgh. Her research is driven by the desire to gain deeper insight into premodern Japanese conceptualisations of the cosmos and the history of ideas concerning predominant meaning-making processes. While her doctoral work focussed on explanatory models that drew on the transcendental realm to provide answers at the boundaries of knowledge from the ninth to twelfth centuries, her current research examines how medieval Japanese narratives featuring transcendent spaces and beings portray the concept of time and what these portrayals can reveal about the worldview.

## ***Flaminia Pischedda***

### **Smoothing the World: Early Chinese divination managing the unexpected**

The strange and the unexpected can be described as phenomena over which humans have no control. Whether it be an earthquake or the birth of a malformed child, extraordinary events can either be related to, or determined by, an extra-human entity, or considered as products of randomness as Xunzi argued in the famous chapter *Tianlun* 天論 (Discourse on Nature). In the latter case, no human agency is at play. In the former, a certain level of human responsibility for causing indirectly the “disturbances of the universal order” is acknowledged (Loewe 2005).

My talk examines this responsibility from an emic viewpoint and discusses the strategies humans have resorted to for coping with the inexplicable and the miraculous. Divination is one of them. As an epistemological tool and interpretive framework, divination can be used both to find sense in and to give sense to the challenges brought about by natural phenomena. Through observing, selecting, and interpreting data, it in turn enables humans to act upon their present and future environment. It facilitates decision-making and adaptation by interpreting (seen and unseen) signs. Divination is thus a multifaceted system which is continually developed and adapted, comprising rituals, symbols, and the production of written knowledge. By trying to make natural environments more accommodating for human life, divination can be regarded as an effective means for exercising control and agency either over or through “miraculous” events and actions, in order to avoid being entirely at the mercy of nature.

Flaminia Pischedda is Postdoctoral Research Fellow in Premodern China at the University of Vienna within the framework of the Cluster of Excellence “EurAsian Transformations.” She works on early Chinese divination manuscript texts. Her interests are early Chinese intellectual history, scribal culture, as well as the commentarial tradition and the history of science.



## **Rebecca Sundén**

### **Wondrous Signs of Success and Ritual Efficacy in the *Subāhupariṣcchātantra***

The *Subāhupariṣcchātantra* (D805) is an early Buddhist work containing a large number of magical rituals. It opens with a dialogue between the human Subāhu and the Bodhisattva Vajrapāṇi. Subāhu makes a heartfelt request to Vajrapāṇi to explain why practice seems to have neither purpose nor result and the Bodhisattva replies by giving a lengthy introduction to a multitude of rituals and how to secure their success, emphasizing the workings of *karma*. Previously this work has been largely studied from the perspective of its more spectacular rituals of catoptromancy, corpse-revival, and the selling of human flesh. The current presentation however will introduce the *tantra* from a different perspective, interpreting the efficacy and purpose of religious practices both supernatural and mundane as constituting its central theme, as outlined in the evocative presentations of the miraculous signs appearing in dreams and fire that are indicative of ritual and spiritual success. This will be explored in two ways. Firstly, by analyzing the interpretation of the root text as found in its longest surviving commentary, the *Subāhupariṣcchātantrapadārthaṭippaṇī* (D2672). The commentary reads as a chronicle of the efficacy of rituals and the workings of *karma*, variously incorporating citations from other *tantras*, from *Jātakas*, as well as from works on Buddhist philosophy. Secondly, based on both the root text and the commentary, by presenting select rituals, their material requirements, the particulars of the ritual location(s) the various signs of success, and the characteristics of the ritual objects used.

Rebecca Sundén received an MA in Tibetan Studies from the University of Hamburg (2023) with a thesis titled “*A Brief Differentiation of Various Views: A Critical Edition and Annotated Translation of the lTa ba tha dad par rnam par phye ba mdor bsdus pa by \*Madhyamaka-Siṃha*,” and is currently a doctoral student at the same university. Within the framework of the Intellexus Project Rebecca studies texts propagating the cross-systemic Buddhist idea of a Middle Way, with a case study centring around a commentary to the *Subāhupariṣcchātantra*.