



# The Buddhist Perspective on the Supernatural

**Buddhism in Every Step**

(英文版)

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# Table of Contents

<b>I. The Definition and Classification of the Supernatural</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>II. The Supernatural in the Social Context</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>III. The Cultivation and Usage of Supernatural Powers</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>IV. The Buddhist Perspective on the Supernatural</b>	<b>29</b>



# **The Buddhist Perspective on the Supernatural**

When we hear the word “supernatural,” we immediately think of mysterious, unusual and superhuman actions. When we face an obstacle, do we not all wish for a miracle? Maybe a superman will appear and eliminate our problems. When someone hits or curses at us, would it not be great if we were martial arts masters? We could use one little finger to pin him to the ground. When being chased, would it not be wonderful if we could fly? We could easily escape the calamity. When someone wants to cause trouble, would it not be great to be able to whisper a spell to make him immobile? When a rich person does not believe in doing good, would it not be nice to gather his money and give it to the poor and needy? The supernatural, to most people, is essentially the wish to be outstanding, to be powerful, and to be capable of accomplishing the impossible. Although

the supernatural can be used to punish the evil and help the needy, it can also be misused to endanger humanity. Does the supernatural have any benefit for society? Is it good or bad? What is the meaning of its existence? This booklet discusses the Buddhist perspective on the supernatural from four aspects.

## **I. The Definition and Classification of the Supernatural**

According to the sutras, the supernatural is a supernormal, unlimited, unimaginable power attained during meditation practice. It is often believed that only the Buddha, bodhisattvas, gods or fairies have supernatural power. In actuality, ghosts and demons can also have such power. Humans have them too. The supernatural is not limited to the unusual acts of causing rain and storms or riding on clouds. It is everywhere in our lives. We can recognize it if we look carefully. When we are exhausted and thirsty after a long journey, a glass of water can quench our thirst. Is that glass of water not like a supernatural potion? A non-swimmer sinks like a rock after falling into water despite frantic yet fruitless struggles. In comparison, a good swimmer simply makes a few easy strokes and kicks to move around like a fish. Is this

not miraculous? Beginning bicyclists may grip the handles with all their might and still fall off their bicycles. The experts can let their hands go and remain securely on their fast moving bicycles. Does this not seem supernatural? We can also describe those amazing circus performances as supernatural. According to science, the body itself is a miracle. Tears flow when one is sad and laughter comes when one is happy. Hunger can be cured by food. Cold sensation can be alleviated by clothing. Are all these phenomena not supernatural? A woman's mammary glands not only secrete milk but also vary the nutrient composition and amount according to the changing needs of the baby. Once the baby stops nursing, all milk production stops automatically. Is this not amazing? The supernatural is not limited to tricks and sorcery; it is everywhere. The change of the four seasons, the blooming and wilting of flowers, the changing faces of the moon, the large and small sizes of the animals, are they not all expressions of wonder?

Wonders are all around us. How many types of supernatural powers are recorded in the Buddhist scriptures? According to the most common classification, there are six main categories. These are heavenly vision, heavenly hearing, the power of knowing others' minds, the power of performing miracles, the

power of knowing past lives, and the power of eradicating all defilements.

### **A. Heavenly Vision**

Human eyes can only see large items. To examine small objects, we need a magnifying glass or microscope. Those with heavenly vision can easily detect the minutest things. Human eyes can only see nearby objects, while distant objects appear blurred and indistinguishable. In contrast, those with heavenly vision view objects far away as clearly as up close. Our human vision is bound by our surroundings. Those with heavenly vision, however, can overcome any obstruction by seeing through walls and mountains. Human eyes can only see with light. Heavenly vision works even in total darkness. Human vision is limited to this world. Heavenly vision extends to all realms of existence. In short, heavenly vision is free and unbounded.

### **B. Heavenly Hearing**

Human ears hear at close range. We need amplifiers and microphones to help us hear sounds from afar. Those with heavenly hearing can hear sounds clearly regardless of the distance. Maudgalyayana, the foremost in supernatural power among all the Buddha's disciples, once tried to see how far the Buddha's



voice could travel. With supernatural power, he traveled to another Buddha world trillions of light years away. There he used his heavenly hearing and he could still clearly hear the Buddha's voice teaching.

We may understand Chinese, but not English, Japanese, or other languages. People with linguistic talents may be able to speak multiple languages but still have limits in understanding other languages. Those with heavenly hearing can understand all languages. Besides human languages, they also understand the singing of the birds and howling of animals.

### **C. The Power of Knowing Others' Minds**

The power to know others' minds is the ability to know precisely what others are thinking. We often complain, "You just do not understand me." It is difficult to understand

ourselves, not to mention trying to understand others. One with the power of knowing others' minds can see the good and evil thoughts in others' minds as if looking through a clear lens. Not a single thought can escape detection.

### **D. The Power of Performing Miracles**

Those with the power of performing miracles can transform a single entity into infinitely many and

combine the infinitely many into one. For these individuals distance is never an issue as they can go as far as they like without difficulties. They also can go through fire, water, or travel through the ground at ease. They may choose to become invisible or reappear. The power of performing miracles allows one to transcend the limitation of space. This power allows one to even take hold of the sun and the moon, and it is the power to alter one's surroundings at will. It is the supernatural power to exempt the body from physical limitations.

### **E. The Power of Knowing Past Lives**

We sometimes are so forgetful that we cannot remember yesterday's events. People with excellent memory can recall events of months or years past. Those with the power of knowing past lives can remember events from their previous lives as clearly as yesterday's events. Besides knowing about themselves, those with this power can know the past of other sentient beings as well. When someone dies, those with this power also can foretell this person's future retribution from karma as well as the place of rebirth.

## F. The Power of Eradicating All Defilement

Defilement is affliction. Those with the power of eradicating all defilement will no longer suffer any affliction. They will not be subjected to the cycles of birth and death, nor will they ever have to be born in this world of ignorance. The aforementioned five supernatural powers are not unique to Buddhist practitioners; ghosts, demons, gods and fairies may all have similar powers, yet they still cannot escape the rounds of rebirth. The five supernatural powers are therefore not the ultimate. Only the ultimate power of eradicating all defilement can enable one to go beyond the cycles of rebirth. This power can only be attained by the Buddhist saints such as the Buddha and Arhats. This power lies beyond the reach of unenlightened mortals or spirits.

Besides the classification of six supernatural powers mentioned above, the sutras also classify supernatural powers based on how the power is acquired. From the *Explanation of the Mahayana*, supernatural powers were divided into those attained through cultivation, meditation, casting spells, or evil spirits. According to the *Mirror Record of Transmission*, supernatural powers can be obtained through five methods: cultivation, meditation, spells, karma, and spirits.

## **A. Obtaining Supernatural Power through Cultivation**

The ultimate supernatural power is attained through cultivation of the Middle Way. When one is enlightened to the truth of the Middle Way in all existence, he or she can maintain the mind of no thought toward all phenomena and events encountered throughout the day. One knows all phenomena in the universe, yet one is not attached. Power obtained through cultivation allows one to be totally liberated and free from the cycles of rebirth.

## **B. Obtaining Supernatural Power through Meditation**

Supernatural power can be obtained through meditation practices. The arhats, during cultivation, can attain power through the four dhyana states and eight mental concentration levels. They can understand the worldly phenomena and know past and future lives.

## **C. Obtaining Supernatural Power through Spells**

Spells and potions can produce supernatural power. This is the power of sorcerers and witches. They can call upon winds and fires. They make themselves

invisible by hiding under water or in the ground, etc. This type of power is the most prone to be abused as a means to harm others.

#### **D. Obtaining Supernatural Power as the Result of Karma**

As the result of their karma, some sentient beings may have supernatural power, too. Ghosts can transport themselves across physical barriers and travel rapidly over a long distance. Birds can fly in the sky and fish can live in the water. Different sentient beings have their unique karma, not shared by others. The result is a colorful combination of creatures with different appearances and abilities.

#### **E. Supernatural Power of Spirits**

Spirits and genies can supernaturally absorb cosmic energies from heaven and earth. After a long period of time, these spirits can manifest in human form and play tricks on people. Therefore, supernatural power can be obtained through cultivation of the Middle Way, meditation and mental concentration, usage of spells and potions, as a result of karma, as well as in other ways. Among the different supernatural powers, some are good while others are evil. There is also great variation of levels. What we all should

aim for is the ultimate power of eradicating all defilement through the cultivation of wisdom. Once we have attained this ultimate power of eradicating all defilement through cultivation, we will be able to go through the birth and death process without being affected by the usual associated afflictions. We will be able to dwell in the serenity of nirvana without being attached to its comfort. We will stay away from the extremes and walk the Middle Way of Buddhahood.

## **II. The Supernatural in the Social Context**

Most people in our society are particularly attracted to strange and unusual phenomena. The profound, wonderful and practical teachings of the Buddha do not attract similar attention by comparison. The supernatural does have great drawing power for the masses because it satisfies their curiosity. What then is the relationship between the supernatural and people's lives?

### **A. The Supernatural Is Hope in Times of Trouble**

There is a popular saying, "Every household has Amitabha. Every family has Avalokitesvara." Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva is a very popular figure of devotion among the people. How did Avalokitesvara

Bodhisattva enter the lives of so many people? According to “The Universal Gate” chapter of the *Lotus Sutra*, when sentient beings encounter difficulties such as the seven calamities including floods, fires, violence, war, etc., Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva will protect and guide us. This Bodhisattva sometimes even points out a way for us to solve those seemingly impossible problems through our dreams. This Bodhisattva has boundless supernatural power and uses it to liberate sentient beings from suffering and calamity. Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva thus becomes the torch of hope for helpless and suffering beings.

Besides Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva, Goddess Mazu is also held in high esteem. Because Taiwan is an island surrounded by open sea, people have to live by the sea and endure the associated unpredictable dangers. Believed to protect people from drowning, Mazu has been revered as the seafarers’ guardian. Jigong, regarded as a living Buddha by many, has been another popular figure of worship because he frequently used supernatural power to solve problems for suffering people. Just like rain during prolonged drought, the supernatural can bring people hope in a hopeless situation. People often are transfixed by supernatural phenomena.

Speaking of “a living Buddha,” in recent times there was a Buddhist monk, Venerable Miaoshan, who was regarded by the public as “the Living Buddha of the Golden Mountain.” His life had been full of unusual, colorful, and supernatural stories. The Abbot of Golden Mountain Temple, Venerable Taicang, and he were good friends. Once a young woman contracted an unusual, intractable illness and could not swallow. Eventually she went to Golden Mountain Temple for help. Venerable Miaoshan, “the Living Buddha,” asked her to open her mouth, removed some mucus, and she was miraculously cured.

On another occasion, Venerable Taicang and “the Living Buddha” were both using the community bathing facility. Venerable Taicang knew of “the Living Buddha’s” numerous stories of curing and implored, “Living Buddha, with your compassion, please cure my mother’s long-term stomach disease.” Immediately “the Living Buddha” scooped up the bath water and said, “Here, this is a bowl of the soup of prajna. Give it to your mother and she will be cured of all illness.” Venerable Taicang understandably hesitated, yet he could not openly protest. He thought to himself, “This has to be a joke. How can a person drink the used bath water from the community bathing facility?” “The Living Buddha” then said, “This is why I advise



you not to come to me for illness. I have prescribed the soup of prajna, yet you treat it as used bath water. What am I supposed to do?" Therefore, he did not readily agree to treat the people's illnesses. Sometimes when he could not refuse a request, he would employ similarly unusual methods to help others. When he passed away in Burma in 1935, Venerable Cihang assisted in funeral arrangements. To this date, "the Living Buddha" is still remembered by many people because he could solve people's problems and bring them hope. From the above examples, we can understand that the supernatural is not for everyday and not suitable for frequent usage. However, rare usage of the supernatural is like emergency treatment, useful as a temporary quick fix in times of suffering.

### **B. The Supernatural Is the Savior during Upheaval**

There is a saying, "Unusual times require unusual methods." In times of upheavals, social chaos and wars, spreading the Buddhist teachings may not attract the needed attention to ameliorate the situation. On the other hand, supernatural powers may be employed for instantaneous impact. As with a severe illness, the patient first must be saved by emergency procedures followed by long term rehabilitation and treatments.

During the period of upheaval of the Five Nomadic Tribes and Sixteen States (304–439 AD), the killer generals Shi Le and Shi Hu led a murderous rebellion. Countless innocent lives were lost. Venerable Buddhacinga traveled from Central Asia hoping to convert the warring generals.

“You should be kindhearted. You should think for all the people. Do not kill these innocent people,” the Master taught the warlords.

The warlords retorted slyly, “You want us to be kindhearted. We want to see what your kind heart looks like.”

“Fine. Take a close look at it,” Venerable Buddhacinga replied. He drew a sword from a nearby soldier and cut his own chest open. He took out the beating heart and spoke something over a basin of clean water. A white lotus miraculously blossomed out of the water. Buddhacinga then calmly handed over his heart to the warlords and said, “This is my heart, as pure as this white lotus blossom.”

Even the murderous generals had to be impressed by such bravery and power. They became the master’s disciples. Buddhacinga had used his supernatural power to convert the warlords, and he had also saved millions of lives. During upheavals, use of the supernatural can provide the power of a savior.

During the Tang dynasty, a Chan Master, Venerable Yinfeng, also had great supernatural power according to the legends. Once, he came across a fierce battle between two armies and tried to make peace through patient persuasion. Nobody heeded his advice. Finally he threw his staff into the sky. He then flew up and danced with his staff. The battling soldiers were so taken by the sight that they forgot to fight. An otherwise bloody battle was instantaneously stopped by the Chan Master's supernatural power. Since that event, people called him the Master of the Flying Staff.

The Chan Master was very humorous and full of Chan surprises. One day he was lecturing on the subject of life and death. He asked his disciples, "Have you seen people die during sitting meditation?"

His disciples replied, "Certainly. One Chan Master passed away during sitting meditation."

The Chan Master asked, "Then, have you heard of people dying while standing?"

"Yes, we have. The family of Great Being Fu all died while working their farm. Many Pure Land practitioners can also die at will." His disciples replied.

The Chan Master then asked, "How about seeing anyone dying while standing on his head?"

His disciples were astonished and replied, "That we have never heard of or seen before."

The Chan Master said, “Fine. In that case, I will show you.” He then stood on his head and entered nirvana. His disciples were shocked and saddened. They hurried to make funeral arrangements and encountered a difficult problem. When they attempted to move the master’s body, they found it immovable like a steel pillar. No matter how much force they used, they could not pry it off the ground. Nobody knew what to do until the arrival of the master’s sister, a highly cultivated nun. She scolded, “You used your supernatural power to confuse people while alive. Do you still want to use the same trick to impress others at death? Come down now!”

Strangely, the body fell on command. The Chan Master did not want to impress others with his supernatural power. He did want others to see how Chan practitioners could treat the state of death with total control and freedom.

The above mentioned are examples showing that supernatural power can be a great tool during times of upheaval. Some of you may think, “Great! I am going to practice hard and acquire supernatural power, too. I will be able to snatch the leaders of our enemies, and all our problems will be solved.” However, there is more to it than that. When one leader falls, there will be another, and another after that. Force cannot solve

problems completely. Only morality and compassion can bring everlasting peace. During the Period of the Three Kingdoms (222–265 AD), the wise Prime Minister Kong Ming captured and released the rebel Meng Huo seven times because he understood that people could only be won over with virtue, not with tricks or force. We need to have strong confidence in morality and compassion although the effects are not visible immediately. Morality and compassion will change bad customs and purify people's minds. Supernatural power, no matter how potent, can be used only in an emergency and only for temporary relief. The ultimate solutions for our problems lie only in the ordinary.

### **C. Supernatural Power Is a Skillful Means for Teaching**

Supernatural power is usually more readily accepted by the masses than reason. In history, highly esteemed Buddhist masters utilized supernatural power as a skillful method of spreading the Buddhist teachings under unusual circumstances. During the East Han dynasty under the regime of Emperor Ming, Buddhism was introduced into China. Daoists resisted and challenged the Buddhist missionaries to a public duel using supernatural powers. The Emperor

facilitated and presided over this historic contest. The Emperor ordered two rows of tables to be placed in a great hall. The Buddhist scriptures and some of the Buddha's relic were placed on one row of the tables and the Daoist scriptures on the other. Daoist priests proudly arrived either by flying or materializing. Buddhist representatives, Kasyapa matanga and Dharmaraksa, slowly walked inside the hall. The crowd was betting that the monks could not beat the Daoist priests. After both sides settled into their respective seats, the Daoist priests initiated the attack by using spells to incinerate the Buddhist scriptures. Nothing happened. Instead, the Buddha's relic emanated brilliant light. When the light reached the Daoist scriptures, these books instantly caught on fire and were quickly destroyed. At this point Kasyapamatanga flew up into the sky and spoke:

*“A fox cannot be compared to the majestic lion;*

*A lamp cannot match the brilliance of the sun and the moon;*

*A pond cannot be as all-encompassing as the ocean;*

*A hill cannot be as tall and grand as a  
mountain.*

*The clouds of the Dharma cover the world,*

*Enabling those with seeds of goodness to  
sprout and grow.*

*The manifestation of supernatural powers is  
but a means*

*For liberating the ignorant throughout.”*

This verse means that the spirit of Buddhism is as dignified and majestic as the lion, the king of all animals. How can Daoist, fox-like, crooked tendencies compare? Daoism is like an oil lamp; its wisdom cannot match that of Buddhism, brilliant as the light of the sun and the moon. A pond definitely cannot hold the vast quantity of water in a great ocean; a small hill is definitely no match for a great and tall mountain; how can Daoism compare with the superb realm of Buddhism? The auspicious clouds of the compassionate Buddhist teachings cover the world, enabling those with roots of goodness to sprout and

grow the seeds of Bodhi and eventually attain the supreme fruit of Buddhahood. Supernatural power can be used as a skillful means to direct ignorant sentient beings toward the right path. Supernatural power is not the ultimate way.

The Daoist priests were all petrified upon hearing this verse. They tried to escape but their supernatural powers failed completely. Emperor Ming was impressed by the virtues and powers of Kasyapamatanga and Dharmaraksa. He then built four temples inside and three temples outside the city for nuns and monks respectively. This was the beginning of pure cultivating monks and nuns in China. Because of this duel using supernatural powers, Buddhism finally took root in China and it eventually grew and blossomed. Again, although the use of supernatural powers is not the final solution, it nonetheless can be a skillful means for spreading the teachings.

### **III. The Cultivation and Usage of Supernatural Powers**

Since supernatural powers are so closely related to us, how can we attain them? How should we use this power? We should appreciate the true meaning and wondrous application of supernatural power right in



our lives. For example, when we look at the beautiful flowers, green grasses, or the clear moon, our spirits naturally become uplifted and joyful. Is this not supernatural? When we wish to please another person, we can say a few words of praise and this person will beam with delight. If we say the wrong words, however, the other person may scold us instead. Is this not the supernatural use of language? Human emotions, such as happiness, rage, sadness, and joy, are they not all supernatural? The supernatural is all around us. We should take delight in it during our ordinary lives. When we wish to watch a television program, we push a button on the remote control and instantly images appear on the screen. These images may be from far away, even from a distant country via satellite transmission. Is this not heavenly vision? When we pick up a telephone, we can hear voices from afar, even through the obstacles of mountains. Is modem communication not heavenly hearing? Now airplanes allow us to fly like birds, reaching any destination we like. Do we not have the miraculous power of traveling anywhere? If we are watchful, we will discover that our everyday existence is supernatural. It is just that when we are inattentive, the supernatural is no longer wondrous.

The supernatural is also in nature. For example, when dark clouds fill the sky, rain will fall from the

sky. Sometimes when the sun is still shining, large raindrops fall even though the sun is shining. Is this phenomenon supernatural? Depending on the interaction of different pressure systems, gentle breezes, wind gusts, hurricanes, even thunder storms, hail or snow may occur. The seasons change and enable all sentient beings to continue their growth and maintain a harmonious ecological balance. All these changes in nature can be regarded as supernatural.

In our daily lives, the supernatural is also the accumulation of experience, the expression of human wisdom, and the skillful utilization of resources. The terms printed on the Chinese calendar, such as “beginning of spring,” “the waking of insects,” “rain water,” “autumnal equinox,” “severe cold,” etc., describe seasonal periods as noted through the experience of countless generations and represent a precious inheritance from our ancestors. Farmers use their years of experiences to predict the weather and to decide the proper time for planting and harvesting. In our society, many experts have already warned us about population explosion, environmental pollution and energy shortage so that we may plan for the future now. How can all these people see into the future? Experience empowers them to predict the future. Experience is powerfully supernatural.

Besides experience, a decision made through wisdom is also supernatural. The wise Prime Minister Kong Ming could predict the future accurately and devise unusual strategies to secure a stronghold for the Kingdom of Shu during the Period of the Three Kingdoms. Mr. Wang Yangming advocated “seeing things through one’s conscience” and “using actions to accompany knowledge in predicting the future.” History is full of wise individuals who see the changes of time and predict trends of the future. They are capable of making these predictions because of their wisdom. The supernatural is also an expression of wisdom. When we face difficulties, if we analyze the situation and devise solutions by using our wisdom, the difficulties will be resolved. The accumulation of human knowledge leads to many scientific advances. This is also supernatural. The moon has been regarded as romantic, mysterious, beautiful, and yet out of our reach. Now with a spaceship, we have landed on the moon and have walked on its rugged surface. For anyone living before the twentieth century, would this act not be considered supernatural? With the many recent advances in medical technology, we now have many treatments that would be supernatural to our ancestors. If our skin is badly damaged, we may have a skin graft from another part of our

bodies. If our kidneys or hearts fail to function, we may have a new organ transplanted from a donor. If we cannot see, we may even benefit from a cornea transplant. The success of test tube babies opens a new door for human reproduction. All these advances would be startlingly supernatural to our ancestors. We have invented cloud seeding and airplanes. Are we not calling the rains and flying freely in space now? Supernatural power is not unique to the spirits and devas. If we use our knowledge wisely, we can create endless miracles in our worldly lives, too.

Acquiring supernatural power is not considered difficult in Buddhism. The important question is upon what should supernatural power be based? There are four foundations upon which this power must rest.

### **A. Rely on Kindness and Compassion**

According to *Great Perfection of Wisdom Treatise*, “Bodhisattvas abandon the five desires and attain the different states of meditation. Out of kindness and compassion for all beings, they acquire supernatural powers. They perform miracles to purify people’s minds. Why? If one does not perform the extraordinary, many people cannot be impressed and liberated.” For their love of all beings, even when bodhisattvas have eradicated all defilements, they do not enter nirvana, unlike

sravakas and pratyekabuddhas. Bodhisattvas generate the great bodhi mind and acquire supernatural power so that more sentient beings can be liberated. Why is supernatural power needed for liberating people? It is because most people are ignorant, they do not cherish the truth of the ordinary, and they only pay attention to the extraordinary. Bodhisattvas have to use miracles as a skillful means to impress people. Supernatural power is only a tool for bodhisattvas. Buddhahood is the true goal of bodhisattvas' practice. After all, to cultivate oneself without kindness and compassion is to follow the way of mara. Attaining supernatural power without kindness and compassion is like adding a new arsenal to a ferocious creature. The resulting harm will be even greater. Examples of the cultivation of supernatural power without kindness and compassion include Devadatta using it to damage Buddhism, and the evil spirits using it to harm innocent people. Therefore, before one starts to learn how to obtain supernatural power, one must observe the prerequisite of nurturing one's kindness and compassion. Without compassion, one should not obtain supernatural power.

## **B. Precepts**

Supernatural power based on the pure precepts means that practitioners must uphold these precepts.

Following the precepts is one aspect of the threefold practices of Buddhists. The body and mind should rest on the precepts. By accepting the precepts, we know right from wrong, what should be done and what should not be done. When we have the spirit of keeping the precepts, we will guard our actions with the precepts, we will not use supernatural power to harm others, and we will only use it as a skillful means to help accomplish beneficial deeds in keeping with the precepts. Therefore, when we obtain supernatural power we must be strict in upholding the precepts. Otherwise, the resulting power will become the destructive power of evil.

### **C. Patience**

One with supernatural power must also have the mental discipline of patience. If one does not have the adequate virtue of patience, one will lose control easily. When we have supernatural power, we may be prone to misuse it to attack those we dislike. By doing so, supernatural power is nothing but another sharp weapon for suppressing others. We must learn to be patient and never use supernatural power unless absolutely necessary. Even then, any show of the power is strictly a means for upholding righteous truth and benefiting more people.

## **D. The Ordinary**

The sutras say, “The ordinary mind is the Way.” The Dharma is for the purification of character and cultivation, not for the eccentric or unusual. When the mind rests on everyday commonness, it can last for kalpas. In contrast, supernatural power is for the moment only. It cannot eliminate the binding hindrances from our fundamental defilements, nor can it lead us to ultimate liberation in life. Only through seeing the ultimate truth of teachings in our everyday lives and purifying ourselves to enjoy total liberation can we be said to have true supernatural power.

My maternal grandmother became a vegetarian and started diligent cultivation in Buddhism around age seventeen. She took care of me from my early childhood. She influenced me greatly and helped to plant the causes for me to become a monk later. I recall that as a young child I stayed with my grandmother all the time. I was always awakened by the incredible wave-crashing sounds from her stomach at night. As a curious child, I asked, “Grandma, why does your stomach make sounds?”

She replied confidently, “This is the result of cultivation.”

After becoming a monk, I studied with many Buddhist masters. None of their stomachs ever made any sounds. Could these masters not be as spiritually cultivated as Grandma? Eventually as I grew up, I realized the answer. After seven or eight years, at age twenty, I returned home one summer to visit my grandmother. I saw her sitting alone under a tree. I sat next to her and asked, “Grandma! Can your stomach still make sounds?”

“Of course. How can I lose the result of my cultivation?” Grandmother replied with confidence.

I asked her pointedly, “What is the use of a sound-making stomach? Can it eradicate defilement and sorrow, develop virtue and morality, and stop the rounds of rebirth?”

Grandmother was at a loss as to how to reply. Just then an airplane with a loud roaring engine flew overhead. Relentlessly, I asked further, “That airplane engine can make a much louder sound than your stomach. Tell me, how does a stomach making sound contribute to a person’s life?”

After listening to my questions, grandmother was startled and confused. Silently she stood up and went inside the house. Now decades have passed. Whenever I recall my grandmother’s confused and disappointed expression, I feel deeply apologetic.



Although her unusual skill could be considered a kind of supernatural power, a temporary skill at best, it was nonetheless the fruit of decades of diligent cultivation. How could I have been so insensitive as to damage her confidence so? On the other hand, I believe that she would eventually appreciate my wholehearted intent on guiding her into the correct way of practice among the ordinary.

#### **IV. The Buddhist Perspective on the Supernatural**

Supernatural power is hope in times of trouble; it is the savior during upheaval; it is a skillful means for teaching the Dharma. Supernatural power must be experienced in ordinary living. The Buddhist perspective on the supernatural may be summarized in four points as follows:

##### **A. Supernatural Power Is Not the Ultimate**

According to the sutras, even though two thousand years have passed, several of the Buddha's disciples still live amongst us. Mahakyasyapa, one of the Buddha's top disciples, is guarding the Buddha's robe and in deep meditation inside Kukkutapada mountain. He is waiting for the birth of Maitreya Buddha

fifty-six trillion and seven hundred million years from now. He will present the robe, which represents the correct Dharma of the previous Buddha, to Maitreya Buddha for the continuous spread of the teachings.

Venerable Pindolabharadvaja is another of Buddha's disciples still living amongst us. He is one of the sixteen disciples named in The *Amitabha Sutra*. He has become an arhat. Why would an arhat remain here and not enter nirvana? It is because once he used his supernatural power in front of the devotees. Once, when in a jubilant mood, he said to the devotees, "Do you think flying in the sky is supernatural? I will show you some spectacular acts."

He then leaped into the sky and performed many miraculous acts. The devotees were all impressed and praised him unceasingly. The Buddha was very displeased upon learning of this incident. He asked the Venerable to come forth and admonished him, "My teaching uses morality to change others and compassion to save sentient beings. It does not use supernatural power to impress and confuse people. You have misused supernatural power today. As punishment, I order you to stay in this world, to cultivate more virtue and to repent for this misbehavior before entering nirvana."

Because the Venerable misused his supernatural power, he still has to live and suffer amongst us. Supernatural power cannot increase our virtue or eradicate defilements. Careless use will only build more obstacles to liberation. It is obvious that supernatural power is not the solution for cycles of rebirth. Practicing virtue is the only sure and steady approach toward the Buddha Path.

### **B. Supernatural Power Cannot Mitigate the Force of Karma**

The strongest force in this world is not supernatural power. It is the force of deeds, or karma. In Chinese history, there once was an uprising in which millions of people were slaughtered. There was a saying, “Rebel Huang will kill eight million. If you are in that number and it is your tum, you can never escape.” The legend held that this rebel did kill eight million people before he was suppressed. Regardless of whether this story is factual or mythical, we will talk about the phrase “your number and your tum.” What does it mean? It means that none can escape karma. Those citizens during that uprising shared common karma which had to be repaid with blood. Supernatural power cannot overcome the hindrance of karma. We must reap what we have sown. There is no escape.

Once, King Virudhaka of Kosala was attacking the Buddha's motherland, Kapilavastu. Maudgalyayana, foremost in supernatural power among the Buddha's disciples, volunteered to save the Sakya clan. The Buddha replied sadly, "Maudgalyayana, this is the Sakya clan's karma and they have not repented for it. Today they will have to pay for their deeds. Although they are my family, even my supernatural power cannot spare them."

Maudgalyayana did not believe the Buddha's words. He flew into the city, which was completely surrounded by troops. He picked five hundred Sakya clansmen and, using his supernatural power, put them in his alms bowl. He flew out of the city and happily came before the Buddha. He said, "Lord Buddha. Look! I have saved a group of your clansmen."

However, looking into the bowl, he was shocked. The clansmen had turned into a pool of blood. Even Maudgalyayana himself, renowned for his supernatural power, could not overcome the force of karma. He could fly freely into heaven and had ventured into hell to save his mother. Yet, he was eventually killed by a stone thrown by heretics. How can a venerable with such great supernatural power be so easily killed by a stone? Many of the Buddha's disciples were perturbed and angry. The Buddha spoke to the

disciples, “Supernatural power cannot mitigate the force of karma. It is Maudgalyayana’s karma to be killed by the stone thrown by heretics. You should not doubt the limit of supernatural power. It is more important to diligently purify your action, speech, and thought.”

There is a saying, “A boxer is killed by a fist. A swimmer drowns in water.” Supernatural power is not omnipotent. One must not think that supernatural power will make one fearless. The force of prior karma cannot be influenced by supernatural power. If we only rely on supernatural power, we can worsen our situation and may even lose our lives.

### **C. Supernatural Power Is Inferior to Virtues**

Beginning students in Buddhism are most attracted to supernatural power. When they learn about someone who has had a supernatural experience, they flock to see this person. They usually overlook the cultivation of virtue in daily living. Wisdom is only developed through deep mental concentration from meditation, and meditation success relies on upholding precepts in daily living. All serious students of Buddhism must start from the foundation of morality, not supernatural power.

Do you really think supernatural power will make your life happier? As long as we cannot read minds, even though people may hate us and curse us, we do not know it and everything is okay. If we could read minds, we would know that this person is totally immoral, that one is hateful, and the other one is full of devious ideas. We would feel uncomfortable among these people. Even when we wished to be spared, we would still have the information anyway. Every day would be a long day. Suppose that we were about to die tomorrow but we did not know that, then today still would be a joyful day. If we had the power of knowing the future and we found out that death awaited us in twenty years, from this day on we would live our lives anxiously under the shadow of death. If we had heavenly vision and found our loved ones having an affair, we would be consumed by jealousy and life would be miserable. If we do not know, we may live happily as ever. If we had heavenly hearing, we might find our most trusted friends reviling us behind our backs, and we would certainly be enraged. Without heavenly hearing, we may enjoy more peace and quiet.

Supernatural power would not necessarily make life better. Morality and virtue are the true inexhaustible treasures. Before we are accomplished in

high virtue and morality, we should not have supernatural powers. A life of virtue is superior to that of one with supernatural power.

#### **D. Supernatural power Cannot Surpass Emptiness**

Supernatural power is in the realm of phenomena. The prajna wisdom of Buddhism is in the realm of emptiness which is everywhere, not bounded by anything. When there is experience in life, experience is supernatural. When there is wisdom in life, wisdom is supernatural. When we have different capabilities in life, those capabilities are supernatural. There is the truth of emptiness in life; the truth of emptiness is also supernatural. The wisdom of emptiness is very profound. It is not void or annihilation as most people commonly believe. Emptiness allows existence. It is the source of all phenomena. For example, because of the empty space in a lecture hall, it can accommodate people and make lecture series possible. When our hearts are as broad as the universe, we too can have the capacity for everything. Emptiness is the most powerful force. Supernatural power cannot compare with its boundlessness and inexhaustibility.

Once, the Chan Master Venerable Daoshu settled next to a Daoist temple. The Daoist priests were very

irate at his presence and used every kind of trick to scare him away. Almost all the residents were frightened away. However, the Chan Master remained unmoving as ever. After twenty years, the Daoist priests gave up. People asked, “What supernatural power did you use to beat those Daoist priests?”

The Chan Master replied, “Oh, nothing. I used emptiness to beat them. Daoist priests have supernatural power and tricks. Having is being finite, being exhaustible, being bounded, being measurable. I do not have any supernatural power. Not having means being infinite, inexhaustible, boundless, and immeasurable. Therefore, emptiness (not having) can overcome supernatural power (having) by being broader, greater, higher, superior.”

Buddhism uses emptiness as existence. It is much more powerful than supernatural power. The wisdom of emptiness is much more advanced than supernatural power. People will be much better off attaining the truth of emptiness than supernatural power. The truth of emptiness will be far more essential and valuable.



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