

# Theurgy, Divination and Theravadan Buddhism by Garry Phillipson

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## Introduction

Theurgy – 'god-work' as distinct from theology which is 'god-talk' – was advocated by Iamblichus as a needed corrective to the overly-intellectual orientation which he saw developing in Platonism.<sup>1</sup> This paper attempts to bring additional material to discourse on theurgy and divination by considering how 'theurgy' might be understood in Theravadan Buddhism. In doing so I want to begin with a simple etymological reading of theurgy as 'god-work'. This is not to deny that the precise definition and scope of 'theurgy' is somewhat problematic. The Buddhist view will, however, emerge naturally if we simply ask how 'god-work' is understood in the *Dhamma* (the teaching of the Buddha), and follow where the question leads.

Iamblichus is something of a shadowy presence in what follows. For although it is his name which is particularly associated with the term 'theurgy', I will not attempt to do more than note a few points of comparison between his thought and Buddhism.

Given the terrain it will traverse, the paper may also serve some purpose in providing perspective on the question of whether Theravadan Buddhism can be taken as evidence that religion need not have anything to do with superhuman agents.<sup>2</sup> To be sure, there is no shortage of superhuman agents in the Pali Canon. Yet, when Richard Gombrich was researching Buddhism in modern Sri Lanka, a monk told him: "Gods are nothing to do with religion."<sup>3</sup> And that statement is consonant with the Buddha's teaching. So there is an apparent contradiction here which this paper will tease out.

Divination was understood by Plato and Iamblichus to be a form of theurgy<sup>4</sup>, but I have included it as a separate term in the title, marking the particular focus on divination – particularly astrology – in the second half of this paper. Here I should note that, in treating astrology as a form of divination, I am on controversial ground since there are astrologers who believe that their subject can be explained, *in its entirety*, as an exact science.<sup>5</sup> This issue will be touched on later, though with no claim to address it comprehensively.

To complete my introductory caveats, I should also say that in approaching the Theravadan tradition I have taken the Pali Canon as my source, without any attempt to discriminate between the different texts therein as older or more recent, and (therefore) as more or less reliable. A note on the Pali material will be found at the end.

## Brahma-faring

At first sight, the place of theurgy in Buddhist thought is both straightforward and central. As we shall see presently, some of the higher gods in Buddhist cosmology are the Brahmās, and the Buddha often refers to the practice of his teaching as 'Brahma-faring': travelling towards divinity.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Shaw, Gregory, *Theurgy and the Soul – The Neoplatonism of Iamblichus* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995) pp.4-5.

<sup>2</sup> Criticised by Penner, Hans H, 'You Don't Read a Myth for Information' in Frankenberry, Nancy K, *Radical Interpretation in Religion* (Cambridge University Press, 2002) p.159. Penner traces this idea back to Durkheim.

<sup>3</sup> Gombrich, Richard, *Precept and Practice: Traditional Buddhism in the Rural Highlands of Ceylon* (Oxford University Press, 1971) p.46.

<sup>4</sup> Shaw (1995) p.231-2.

<sup>5</sup> For more on this issue, see: Cornelius, Geoffrey, *The Moment of Astrology (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.)* (Bournemouth, The Wessex Astrologer, 2003); Phillipson, Garry, *Astrology in the Year Zero* (London: Flare Publications, 2000) particularly Ch.12.

<sup>6</sup> E.g. at *Majjhima Nikāya* i.10. NB that this common phrase (*brahma-cariya*) is often rendered as 'holy life' or some equivalent phrase in translations. It is given as the more literal 'brahma-faring' at e.g. Horner, I.B., *Middle Length Sayings Vol.1* (London: Pali Text Society, 1976) p.13. See 'Note on Pali Source Material' at the end of this paper for details of Pali texts and translations.

Further, a group of four meditations he taught are called the 'Brahma-Vihāras' – the dwellings of Brahma, or the 'divine abidings'.<sup>7</sup>

However, the Buddha's attitude towards rebirth amongst the Brahmas was ambiguous. He would teach someone the way to attain such a rebirth if he judged that they were not capable of anything more; but if the person was capable of developing the insight which would establish them on the path to *nibbāna*,<sup>8</sup> enlightenment, then he would judge rebirth amongst the gods an inadequate goal.<sup>9</sup>

## Cosmology – 31 Realms

In the commentaries to the Pali Canon a system of thirty-one different planes of existence is set out.<sup>10</sup> These break down into three broad categories – three world-systems, or *Lokas*. The human realm belongs to the lowest of the three, *Kāma-Loka*.

Besides the human realm, *Kāma Loka* includes the "Woeful Way" – four states which involve more suffering than the human, and the Celestial Realms – states populated by *devas* (deities, or gods) where life is more pleasant than it is in this world.

Moving to the states below human, the lowest state in the Woeful Way is Niraya Hell. The other realms below human show similar levels of involvement with the senses: for example, *petas*, or hungry ghosts, are often depicted as having mouths the size of a pin-head, and stomachs the size of a mountain. They are continually driven to satisfy impossible desires.

The states 'above' human involve increasing levels of absorption in ever more refined pleasures. Above *Kāma Loka* stands the world system known as *Rūpa-Loka* - the realm of form, or as it is sometimes put, the 'fine material' realm. Of the five physical senses known in *Kāma Loka*, only seeing and hearing are considered to exist at this level.<sup>11</sup>

The highest world-system is *Arūpa-Loka* - the formless realms, in which mind has temporarily left matter behind altogether.

The expectation might be that there would be a linear progression through the 31 worlds to *nibbāna*. This, however, is exactly what does not happen; there is, as it were, a glass ceiling in heaven. The highest realm of *Arūpa-Loka* is "The realm of neither-perception nor non-perception". The point here is that the being at this level has almost shaken off the limitations of individuality; the sense of separation from all-that-is has become attenuated. However, there lingers in mind a fragment of belief in separation so that the being at this level thinks something to the effect of, 'Wow, look at this, I'm almost at one with the cosmos' and thereby perpetuates their separateness. That is the meaning of "neither perception nor non-perception"; the dualistic perception of "me as a separate self, separate from the universe" has not *quite* been shaken off. From the Buddhist point of view, this is a major problem.

For although life in the many of the 31 realms can go on for huge periods of time, a life in any realm is transient: sooner or later any being, in any realm, will die and take rebirth in some other realm, in accordance with their past *kamma*.<sup>12</sup> This is the nature of *samsara* – the word means "perpetual wandering". As if to underline the ultimately unsatisfactory nature of life as a god, the commentaries to the Pali Canon state that there are five signs of impending death in a *deva* (a god in *Kāma Loka*): their flower garland withers, their clothes get dirty, sweat comes from their armpits, their bodies become unsightly, and they get restless.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>7</sup> For a detailed account see *Visuddhi-Magga* Ch.IX.

<sup>8</sup> The Pali form of the Sanskrit *nirvana*.

<sup>9</sup> In *Majjhima Nikāya* Sta 99 the Buddha teaches Subha the way to attain rebirth as a Brahma and nothing more; in *Majjhima Nikāya* Sta 97 he reproves one of his most senior monks, Sāriputta, for doing exactly the same for Dhānañjāni (who was on his death-bed) and leaving him to die "while there was still more to be done".

<sup>10</sup> See e.g. Bhikkhu Bodhi, *A Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma* (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1993) p.186-7. A good, accessible analysis will be found in: Gethin, Rupert, *The Foundations of Buddhism* (Oxford University Press, 1998) Ch.5.

<sup>11</sup> See article 'Loka' in Nyānatiloka, *Buddhist Dictionary 4<sup>th</sup> Edn.* (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1980) p.108.

<sup>12</sup> The Pali form of the Sanskrit *karma*.

<sup>13</sup> Ñānamoli (tr.), *The Path of Purification* (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1979), p.667 n.43.

## God, Words, Scepticism

There is, as is well known, no such thing as an all-powerful God in Buddhism. The Buddha did, however, describe how the *idea* of God Almighty arises. Basically, he described a being who is reborn in a heaven realm, and is on his own for a few aeons, whereupon "there arises in him mental weariness and a longing for company thus: 'Would that some other beings come to this place!'" And it just so happens that some other beings happen to be born there, at around that time.

Then, the Buddha said, the first god – believing that he has *created* these other beings - thinks to himself:

I am the Brahma, the great Brahma, the conqueror, the unconquered, the all-seeing, the subjector of all to his wishes, the omnipotent, the maker, the creator, the Supreme Being, the ordainer, the Almighty, the Father to all that have been and shall be.<sup>14</sup>

And the other beings there believe this too. Eventually, one of them dies and appears in the human realm, and – based on memories of this previous life – begins to preach of an almighty God.

This illustrates the familiar point that there is an element of scepticism running through the Buddha's teaching. This is not to say, however, that Buddhism is in any sense anti-religious. There is *nibbāna* - the soteriological goal of Buddhism. And it could well be argued that this is no different from what many mystics have used the word "God" to point toward. The problem with the G-word for Buddhist thought is that it can be mis-taken to define the transcendent goal as something conceivable. Whereas the Buddha characterised *nibbāna* as beyond the power of conceptual thought, capable only of being defined by what it is not:

There is, monks, a domain where there is no earth, no water, no fire, no wind... there is not this world, there is not another world, there is no sun or moon. I do not call this coming or going, nor standing, nor dying, nor being reborn; it is without support, without occurrence, without object. Just this is the end of suffering.<sup>15</sup>

In a similar spirit, the earliest sculptures of the Buddha are aniconic – not depicting him directly, and indeed using various devices to emphasise that he is *not* depicted.<sup>16</sup>

To characterise the absolute only with negatives is hardly unique to Buddhism. In the West, negative, or apophatic, theology extends back at least as far as Pseudo-Dionysius. Maimonides wrote: "... I do not merely declare that he who affirms attributes of God has not sufficient knowledge concerning the Creator... but I say that he unconsciously loses his belief in God."<sup>17</sup>

Although the connection may not be immediately apparent, this in fact brings us to the question, why should there be exactly 31 realms of existence? 32 was seen as a good, round number in the Buddha's day – for instance there are the 32 marks of the great man, 32 parts of the body, 32 kinds of kamma-resultant and so on. So the significance of there being 31 realms may be that *nibbāna* is being implied, through the incompleteness of the number.

So far as I know, the Buddhist scholar Rupert Gethin is the first person in modern times to suggest this.<sup>18</sup> It is also well worth citing him on the broader significance of cosmology for the Buddha's teaching:

The key to understanding the Buddhist cosmological scheme lies in the principle of *the equivalence of cosmology and psychology*. I mean by this that in the traditional understanding the various realms of existence relate rather closely to certain commonly (and not so commonly) experienced states of mind.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> *Dīgha Nikāya* i.18 (p.76).

<sup>15</sup> *Udāna* 80 – found at e.g. p.165 of Masefield, Peter, *The Udāna* (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1994) though the translation used here is from Gethin 1998, p.76.

<sup>16</sup> For examples see: Bechert, Heinz & Gombrich, Richard (eds), *The World of Buddhism* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1984) pp.18-19.

<sup>17</sup> Maimonides, Moses, *Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: Dover, 1956), p.89 [Cited in: Davies, Brian, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) p.146.]

<sup>18</sup> Gethin (1998) p.126.

The location of the human realm is crucial in this scheme. In *Samyutta Nikāya* the Buddha tells his monks that he has seen hell, where the experience of the six senses (the five physical senses and mind as the sixth) is exclusively painful; he has seen heaven, where the six-sensory experience is exclusively pleasant. And he just says, enigmatically, “Monks, it is a gain for you, it is well gained by you, that you have obtained the opportunity for living the holy life.”<sup>20</sup>

The commentary to this volume offers amplification of this theme:

It isn’t possible to live the holy life of the path either in hell, because of extreme suffering, or in heaven, because of extreme pleasure, on account of which negligence arises through continuous amusements and delights. But the human world is a combination of pleasure and pain, so this is the field of action for the holy life of the path.<sup>21</sup>

Leibniz famously said that we live in “the best of all possible worlds”. Here, the Buddha suggests that this *is* the best of all possible worlds (from a soteriological perspective), precisely because it is *not* the best or worst of worlds (in terms of quotidian pleasure). It is seen as possible, in a human life, to experience the delights and agonies of all possible worlds – and, through so doing, to realise that even the highest gods have not found a lasting solution to life’s problems.

### Attaining Heavenly States

There are many descriptions, in the Pali Canon, of how to systematically cultivate states of concentration which correspond to the various heavenly states. This is theurgy in a most literal sense – working so as to become a god. Here, very briefly, is the course of practice as it is set out in the *Visuddhi Magga*.<sup>22</sup> The student should approach a teacher. They should then settle in to their new environment, and work with any corrective measures the teacher judges appropriate in order to balance their character. The analysis of six temperament types which is brought in at this point would make a study in itself.<sup>23</sup> The practice, when it begins, consists in taking a *kasina* – a coloured disk made of clay. (Many other meditation objects could be taken as the focus of concentration, e.g. the sensations which arise in the abdomen, or at the nostrils and upper lip, dependent upon breathing; in every case, the principle is the same.) The meditator puts the *kasina* on a wall, stares at it, then closes their eyes and tries to see an after-image of the disk.<sup>24</sup>

The common experience is that, the human mind being what it is, this is easier said than done. In order to progress, the meditator needs to become aware that their mind pours energy into one or more of a group of five mental actions called *nivarana* (hindrances). What is needed is to stop putting energy into these mental actions, and instead to develop five qualities called the ‘*jhāna* factors’ – each of which needs to be present, in balance, for the meditation to succeed. Each *jhāna* factor overcomes a specific hindrance, so:<sup>25</sup>

<b>Jhāna Factor</b>	<b>Hindrance</b>
Initial Application of Mind	Sloth & Torpor
Sustained Application of Mind	Sceptical Doubt
Pleasurable Interest	Ill-will
Happiness	Restlessness
Concentration	Sensual Craving

Through repeated attempts, the ability gradually builds to keep the mind steady and to withdraw from involvement with the world. The meditation object starts to acquire a life of its own, and the meditator starts to be pulled deeper into a series of increasingly refined levels of concentration

<sup>19</sup> Gethin (1998) p.119-20.

<sup>20</sup> *Samyutta Nikāya* IV.126 (p.1207).

<sup>21</sup> Bhikkhu Bodhi (tr.) *Connected Discourses of the Buddha – a New Translation of the Samyutta Nikāya* (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 2000) p.1419 (quoting the commentary to *Samyutta-Nikāya*).

<sup>22</sup> *Visuddhi-Magga* III.57 – 73 (p.98 – 102)

<sup>23</sup> *Visuddhi-Magga* III.74 – 102 (p.102 – 111)

<sup>24</sup> *Visuddhi-Magga* IV.21 – 34 (p.127 – 132)

<sup>25</sup> *Visuddhi-Magga* IV.86 [141] (p.147)

known as the 8 *jhānas*. As remarked by Gethin, above, these meditative states correspond to the heaven worlds of Rūpa and Arūpa Loka.

The teachings also include a description of how to develop various magical powers – the divine ear, penetration of minds, recollection of past lives, and knowledge of the arising and passing away of beings.<sup>26</sup> All these involve purifying the mind through attaining *jhāna*-level concentration, and then applying it in various specific ways.

It is human, all too human, to want to join the company of the very highest gods yet not address the underlying sense of separateness which, in the Buddha's analysis, is at the root of all our problems. When he described someone working through the *jhānas*, he said that – after attaining the highest meditative state possible – a true follower of his teachings would 'consider thus':

Non-identification even with the attainment of the base of neither perception nor non-perception has been declared by the Buddha; for in whatever way they conceive, the fact is ever other than that.<sup>27</sup>

The following, in which a 20<sup>th</sup> century Buddhist monk, Kapilavaddho Bhikkhu, writes of his meditative experiences in Thailand may help make clear what is entailed by 'non-identification'. In the immediately preceding passage Kapilavaddho has attained various *jhāna* states and developed the ability to explore his past lives.

Quite suddenly... I knew for a certainty that going back into supposed past lives would never bring me to the beginning, the starting point of the something I called me. I had learned that the very nature of consciousness was to remain conscious, to grasp at anything that consciousness may remain... I then knew that the questions – 'Where have I come from? Where am I going? Who am I? Do I have a permanent soul?' – were but wrong questions. They could not be answered without definition.... I now knew – and with the knowing touched for the first time in my life peace and tranquillity – that the whole of sensible existence had not first beginning, that all things in the world and in that which observed it were dependently originated. Everything which existed came to be but momentarily dependent upon past causes and present supporting circumstances... I had... found the teaching of the Buddha to be true. Nothing of me had been annihilated in the process, for how can that be destroyed which one has never possessed? All that had happened was that I had lost a concept, a concept of *myself* or *soul* as permanent in opposition to a changing world. A concept which was itself but ignorance or blindness to the truth. I was part of my world and my world was part of me. We co-existed interdependently.<sup>28</sup>

It would surely not be controversial to characterise what Kapilavaddho was engaged in as theurgy – working to attain god-like states of consciousness and powers. The quotation illustrates, however, that so far as Buddhist thought is concerned, the ultimate purpose of this 'god-work' is to serve as a platform from which to develop insight into the ultimate ground of being; the fact of being an inseparable part of all that is. At this point a central distinction in the Buddha's teaching comes into focus; this is the distinction between *samatha* (concentration meditation) and *vipassanā* (insight meditation). *Samatha* on its own is considered to lead to companionship with the gods but no further; *vipassanā* needs to be cultivated so as to break through the ignorance that perpetuates belief in separate self-hood, thereby to realise enlightenment. So when the Buddha spoke of his teaching as 'Brahma-faring', he was using a phrase which his contemporaries would recognise as signifying 'striving for the highest'. Although attaining companionship with the gods could be part of this programme, it was not the end-point. The 'highest' for which one could strive, *nibbāna*, was beyond even the highest gods. In Buddhism, therefore, Brahma-faring – the nearest cognate of 'theurgy' – carries the sense of transcending even the highest gods. With this (necessarily compressed) perspective on the Buddha's overall strategy, let us turn to his cultural context.

## Cultural Context

It is widely considered that the Achaemenid occupation of northern India under King Darius I of Persia, around 530BCE, brought a whole raft of Babylonian divinatory practices to the Buddha's neighbourhood.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> *Visuddhi-Magga* Ch. XII

<sup>27</sup> *Majjhima Nikāya* iii.45 (p.912)

<sup>28</sup> Randall, Richard, *Life as a Siamese Monk* (Bradford-on-Avon: Aukana, 1990) p.130-2.

<sup>29</sup> See e.g. Pingree, David, 'Astronomy and Astrology in India and Iran', *Isis*, June 1963, Vol.54 no.2, pp 229 – 246.

In the *Brahmajāla Sutta* the Buddha specifically mentions a huge number of these divinatory and theurgic practices, including:

Prophesying long life, prosperity, etc or the reverse from the marks on a person's limbs, hands, feet etc; divining by means of omens and signs; making auguries on the basis of thunderbolts and celestial portents; interpreting ominous dreams... making auguries from the marks on cloth gnawed by mice... offering blood sacrifices to the gods... determining whether the site for a proposed house or garden is propitious or not... making predictions for officers of state; laying demons in a cemetery; laying ghosts; knowledge of charms to be pronounced by one living in an earthen house... reciting charms to give protection from arrows... interpreting the significance of the colour, shape, and other features of the following items to determine whether they portend fortune or misfortune for their owners: gems, garments, staffs, swords, spears, arrows, bows, other weapons, women, men, boys, girls, slaves, slave-women, elephants, horses, buffaloes, bulls, cows, goats, rams, fowl, quails, iguanas, earrings (or house-gables), tortoises and other animals... making predictions to the effect that the king will march forth (etc etc)... predicting: there will be an eclipse (and various other celestial and terrestrial phenomena)... such will be the result of the moon's eclipse, such the result of the sun's eclipse... and so on for all the celestial phenomena... arranging auspicious dates for marriages (and so on)... reciting charms to make people lucky or unlucky... obtaining oracular answers to questions by means of a mirror, a girl, or a god; worshipping the sun; worshipping MahaBrahma... invoking the goddess of luck... giving ceremonial mouthwashes and ceremonial bathing; offering sacrificial fires...<sup>30</sup>

The context in which this list is presented is that (in brief) the Buddha is saying he abstains from these things, and that although this abstention is the right thing for him to do, if someone were to praise him for these abstentions they would be focussing on a relatively trivial matter. Whilst the fact of his abstaining is sometimes taken to show that he regards the practices as ethically wrong in an absolute sense, the context doesn't justify so strong a reading. He goes on to list (for instance) "practising as a children's doctor" in the same way.<sup>31</sup> The point being made is that these are things which it is wrong for a recluse to practise. There was an established tradition, in the Buddha's day, of people renouncing their possessions in order to pursue a spiritual quest, relying on gifts of food from lay-people to sustain them. It would be considered wrong for the recluse to do anything to earn these gifts of food, because this would start to introduce a mercenary element into the relationship between the laity and the religious community.

A further reason for the Buddha's distaste for such things may be read into his discussion with the householder Kevaddha. Kevaddha suggested:

It would be well if the Lord were to cause some monk to perform superhuman feats and miracles. In this way Nālandā would come to have even more faith in the Lord.<sup>32</sup>

The Buddha demurs, saying that if superhuman feats were performed, sceptics would allege that they had been achieved, not due to any quality of the Buddha's teaching, but through the agency of "the Gandhāra charm" or "the Manika charm". As Maurice Walshe remarks in his translation of this text,

The sceptic, of course, does not have a really convincing way of explaining things away. Modern parallels suggest themselves.<sup>33</sup>

The Buddha's concern seems to be that, regardless of the merits of their arguments, the sceptics would stir up a storm of controversy about the provenance of psychic feats, tending thereby to deflect attention from the real purpose of the Buddha's teaching. It may be surmised that he would have a similar objection to divination.

The fact of the Buddha's speaking against the involvement of mendicants with various forms of divination can be taken to imply that his recluses would, if left to their own devices, do so. According to the commentarial tradition, the Buddha's first five disciples were former court

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<sup>30</sup> *Dīgha Nikāya* i.9-11. This translation is excerpted from Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The All-Embracing Net of Views* (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1978) p.62 – 4, which incorporates some commentarial explanations to clarify the terms and practices under discussion.

<sup>31</sup> *Dīgha Nikāya* i.12; Bodhi (1978) p.65.

<sup>32</sup> *Dīgha Nikāya*, i.212 (p.175).

<sup>33</sup> Walshe, Maurice (tr.) *Thus Have I Heard (translation of Dīgha Nikāya)* (London: Wisdom Publications, 1987) p.557 n.235.

astrologers.<sup>34</sup> If true, this would make divinatory inclinations an issue from the very inception of the order of monks. In all events it seems clear that there was a strong interest in astrology and other forms of divination in the northern India of the Buddha's time. Likewise when Buddhism arrived in Sri Lanka it would have met a culture that had a serious interest in astrology before Buddhism, which continues to this day.<sup>35</sup> Again, a contemporary account by Terzani tells of a Buddhist monk in Thailand who read horoscopes. Terzani's friend has her chart read by the monk, who tells her, amongst other things:

Your husband has many other women, and you should sue for divorce... You must leave the house you share with your husband, and go and live elsewhere. If you move during the month of October all will be well with you.<sup>36</sup>

The justification the monk gave for reading horoscopes was that Moggallāna (one of the Buddha's chief disciples – we will encounter him shortly) began "telling fortunes" immediately after the Buddha's death. Although historically problematic – in the Pali Canon Moggallāna dies *before* the Buddha – the perpetuation of this idea no doubt tells its own story about the kind of help people want from their religion and their gods.

Though outside the remit of this paper, it is also worth noting in passing that some forms of divination not so different from the ones listed by the Buddha in the *Brahmajāla Sutta* can be found today as established practices within Tibetan Buddhism.<sup>37</sup>

In order to elucidate the approach of the Buddha, as presented in the Pali Canon, to divinatory and theurgical practices, we need to look in some detail at various episodes from the life of the Buddha. There are, for sure, plenty of supernatural goings-on. In one sutta Ānanda, the Buddha's attendant for many years, recites a list of 'wonderful and marvellous qualities' of the Buddha: when he entered his mother's womb, a great measureless light suffused all the worlds; four devas came to protect him from the four quarters (it would be interesting to explore the parallel here with the 'guardians of the four quarters' found in contemporary paganism<sup>38</sup>). At his birth there is again light, plus a quaking and trembling of all the worlds.<sup>39</sup>

Prophecy features after the Buddha's birth. The sage Asita, seeing that the devas are "wildly cheering", enquires why and is told about the birth of the Buddha. He goes to see the boy, and confidently predicts – as an "adept in construing signs and marks" – that the boy will "reach the summit of true knowledge". Though he then weeps, knowing that he himself will be dead before the Buddha begins teaching.<sup>40</sup>

In the commentaries there is an additional account, involving a group of eight court astrologers – five of whom we already encountered. According to one version, five of the eight predicted that Siddhattha Gotama would definitely become a Buddha, whilst the other three said that he would either be a Buddha or a universal monarch. Other commentaries say that seven of the eight astrologers hedged their bets as to whether he would be a Buddha or a universal monarch, and only one – Kondañña – made a definite prediction, that it would indeed be Buddhahood.<sup>41</sup> It is worth remarking that, again according to the commentaries, the astrologers who predicted accurately, (either the five or just Kondañña, depending on the commentary) formed part or all of the group of

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<sup>34</sup> Mahasi Sayadaw, 'Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta – The Great Discourse on the Wheel of Dhamma' at [http://www.buddhanet.net/pdf\\_file/damachak.pdf](http://www.buddhanet.net/pdf_file/damachak.pdf) p.43 [accessed 9th May 2006]. This is a discourse delivered in 1962 about the eponymous sutta found at Samyutta Nikāya 56.11 (p.1843) and drawing upon the commentaries to it.

<sup>35</sup> Kemper, Steven E.G., 'Sinhalese Astrology, South Asian Caste Systems, and the Notion of Individuality', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol.38 No.3 (May 1979), p.478.

<sup>36</sup> Terzani, Tiziano, *A Fortune-Teller Told Me* (London: Harper-Collins, 1998) p.88.

<sup>37</sup> See: <http://www.tibet.com/Buddhism/divination.html> [checked 9th May 2006]

<sup>38</sup> E.g. Anon, 'The Four Quarters/Corners' at <http://www.paganpath.com/cgi-bin/wit/ikonboard.cgi?act=ST;f=25;t=314;st=0> [accessed on 9th May 2006]

<sup>39</sup> *Majjhima-Nikāya* Sta.123 (iii.118 – 124; pp.979 – 984). It is worth noting that the Buddha eventually intervenes and turns this recitation of supernatural occurrences back to the central theme of his teaching – that enlightenment is uncovered through the perception of transience.

<sup>40</sup> *Sutta-Nipāta* III.11 (pp116-117).

<sup>41</sup> Mahasi Sayadaw, 'Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta' (ibid.) For some instances of the story of the astrologers and the Buddha's birth cropping up in medieval Arabic texts, see: Matar, Zeina, 'The Buddha Legend: a Footnote from an Arabic Source' in *Oriens*, vol.32 (1990), pp.440-2.

five who were with the Buddha before enlightenment, and who were the first people he taught after enlightenment.

The night before the Buddha's enlightenment, he had five dreams, each of which presented, in symbols, an omen of what the future held for him.<sup>42</sup>

Immediately after his enlightenment, the Buddha was protected by the king of the *nāgas* – the *nāgas* being giant snake-like spirits.<sup>43</sup>

After enlightenment, the Buddha had some significant interactions with the Brahmā Sahampati (a Brahma god who had been a monk in a previous life and continued to take a keen interest in such matters). Crucially, it was Sahampati who – when the Buddha inclined towards not teaching – pleaded with him to teach.<sup>44</sup>

A number of other suttas make it clear that it was not the exclusive prerogative of the Buddha to interact with gods. For instance we hear of Bāhiya, who thinks that he must be enlightened, or nearly so. Whereupon a deva – a deceased relative, we are told – appears and advises him that not only is he not currently enlightened, but that the ascetic practice he has been pursuing will never get him there. Bāhiya then asks for advice as to whom he should approach for instruction, and the deva suggests a visit to the Buddha, which Bāhiya immediately undertakes.<sup>45</sup>

It would be possible to run up a considerably longer list of interactions with deities and supernatural forces. The Buddha was often described as 'teacher of gods and men', and such a list would need to reflect the many times in the Pali Canon where the Buddha is depicted as coming to the aid of, or teaching, deities such as Sakka (aka Indra), the gods of Sun and Moon, and so on.<sup>46</sup> But let this suffice for now, to establish that such interactions are entirely taken for granted in the Buddha's teaching.

## On Dealing with Gods

A question raised by all of this is, how should we think of our relationship with all these gods? How should we interact with them? In order to begin addressing this question, let me quote another episode from the Pali Canon.

Sāriputta and Moggallāna were the two chief disciples of the Buddha for most of his ministry. One day, just after their regular head-shaving, the two monks were meditating outside.

Two *yakkhas* happened to be passing by (a *yakkha* is a discarnate being – usually rather boisterous and troublesome, more demon than god). One said to the other, "Something tempts me, my friend, to give this recluse a blow on the head". The other replied, "Whoa my friend – do not lay hold of that recluse! Lofty is this recluse, my friend, one of great potency, one of great majesty." After further discussion, however, the first *yakkha* went ahead and gave Sāriputta a blow on the head. The text runs, "And so great was it, that with that blow one would not only cause a *nāga* of seven ratanas or one of seven and a half ratanas<sup>47</sup> to sink but also cleave a great mountain peak." Immediately thereon, the *yakkha* was reborn in hell, saying "I'm burning! I'm burning!"

Moggallāna – who was particularly gifted psychically, and saw celestial beings as a matter of course, saw what happened. He approached Sāriputta and said: "I trust, friend, that you are bearing up, I trust you are finding sustenance; I trust you are feeling no pain?" To which Sāriputta replied, "I am well, friend Moggallāna, I am bearing up. But I do have a slight headache." At this, Moggallāna

<sup>42</sup> Ñānamoli, *The Life of the Buddha* (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1972), p.22. Original source is *Anguttara-Nikaya* V.196.

<sup>43</sup> *Udāna* 2.1 (p.19); Ñānamoli 1972 p.33.

<sup>44</sup> *Samyutta Nikāya* i.137 (p.231). For another interaction, which includes Brahmā Sahampati's previous life as a monk, see *Samyutta Nikāya* v.232 (p.1699).

<sup>45</sup> *Udāna* 1.10 (p.8).

<sup>46</sup> *Dīgha Nikāya* Sutta 20 is little more than a long list of celestial beings who turn up for an audience with the Buddha. At *Samyutta Nikāya* i.50 – 51 (pp.144-6) there is an account of the Buddha saving Candimā and Suriya, devas of Moon and Sun respectively, after they have been swallowed by the demon Rāhu – 'Rahu' being (to this day) the name of the north node of the Moon in Indian astrology. The nodes mark the points where eclipses may occur.

<sup>47</sup> A ratana roughly = 1.5 kilometres.



described what he had seen, and expressed his admiration that Sāriputta was of such power and integrity as to withstand the blow. Sāriputta in turn expressed his admiration of Moggallāna's ability to see all these celestial beings, concluding that he had not seen "even a dust-heap pisācaka" (a sprite or goblin).<sup>48</sup>

So in the Buddhist cosmos, we are interacting with beings from other worlds whether we know it or not; and the quality of their intentions is not exclusively benevolent. The figure of Māra is frequently met with in the Pali Canon; often referred to as 'the evil one' he performs a similar function in many ways to Satan in Christianity. And it is clear that he is able to interact with human beings in a number of ways. For instance on one occasion he takes possession of the minds of some villagers, with the result that they did not give the Buddha anything to eat. On another occasion he just caused a loud noise – "as though the earth were splitting open" – in order to distract some monks from a Dhamma talk with the Buddha. Another time he appeared as a human being – "in the form of a Brahmin, with a large matted topknot, clad in an antelope hide, old, crooked like a roof bracket, wheezing, holding a staff of udumbara wood" and suggested to a group of young monks that they would be better advised to pursue the pleasures of youth than the quest for enlightenment.<sup>49</sup>

In the commentary to the *Khuddakapāṭha* ('Minor Readings' of the Pali Canon), we have the following statement about the beings from heaven worlds with whom the theurgist might hope to interact:

...when deities come for any purpose to the human world, they do so like a man of clean habits coming to a privy. In fact the human world is naturally repulsive to them even at a hundred leagues' distance owing to its stench, and they find no delight in it.<sup>50</sup>

In short, Buddhism presents the would-be theurgist with good news and bad news. The good news is that it is entirely possible to interact with non-human beings. The bad news is that it is by no means guaranteed that such interactions will be recognisable as such, nor that they will be helpful in character. If we place divinatory practices into this context, it is only a short step to Augustine's remark that:

when astrologers give replies that are often surprisingly true, they are inspired, in some mysterious way, by spirits, but spirits of evil...<sup>51</sup>

Or indeed to this from Iamblichus:

All those who are offensive and who awkwardly leap after divine mysteries in a disordered way are not able to associate with the Gods due to the slackness of their energy or deficiency of their power. And on account of certain defilements they are excluded from the presence of pure spirits but are joined to evil spirits and are filled by them with the worst possession.<sup>52</sup> [Shaw p.86]

So far Iamblichus, as for a Buddhist, the question to be asked might not be how to interact with beings from other realms at all, but how to exercise some quality control over the beings with whom the (apparently inevitable) interactions take place.

A Thai monk named Achaan Mun lived from 1870 to 1949. In his biography it is stated that he talked with devas regularly. He once asked them whether they found the smell of a human body repugnant. It is not stated whether he had the preceding quotation from the *Khuddakapāṭha* in mind, but it seems plausible. The response of the devas' leader was (we are told) as follows:

A human being whose life is sustained by dharma is never repulsive to us... Such a person emits a fragrant odor inspiring a reverential respect which draws us to him at all times... The smell of an evil human being who shuns the Teachings and morality is sickening. Such people are blind to the value of the dharma which

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<sup>48</sup> *Udāna* 4.4 (pp.68-70)

<sup>49</sup> *Samyutta Nikāya* I.4.18 (p.207); I.4.17 (p.206); I.4.21 (p.210-11).

<sup>50</sup> Ñānamoli (tr.) *Paramatthajotikā* V.81 (117) (p.127)

<sup>51</sup> St. Augustine (tr. H Bettenson), *The City of God* (London: Penguin, 1984) V.7, p.188,

<sup>52</sup> Quoted Shaw (1995), p.86; source is DM 176-7.

is supreme in all the Three Realms. Their bodies give out a most putrid and evil stench. No angel would ever think of associating with the likes of them.<sup>53</sup>

This discussion between Achaan Mun and the *deva*, together with the *yakkha*'s failure to harm Sāriputta, are illuminated by these verses from the *Dhammapāda*:

Mind is the forerunner of (all evil) states. Mind is chief; mind-made are they. If one speaks or acts with wicked mind, because of that, suffering follows one, even as the wheel follows the hoof of the draught-ox.

Mind is the forerunner of (all good) states. Mind is chief; mind-made are they. If one speaks or acts with pure mind, because of that, happiness follows one, even as one's shadow that never leaves.<sup>54</sup>

This characterises the underlying principle of the law of *kamma* – that ethical actions have consonant resultants for their perpetrator. One way these resultants manifest is in the individual's relationship to the gods. *Kusala kamma* ("skilful action" – what would generally be recognised as 'good karma'; unselfish action) tends to protect one from malevolent influences from non-human realms and open the way for benevolent influences, whilst unskilful actions tend to keep one from the company of the higher gods, and render one susceptible to harmful influences from the lower realms.

This is made explicit in the commentarial description of *mettā* (loving-kindness) meditation, where it is stated that amongst the benefits to the practitioner of this kammically skilful practice are that:

He is dear to non-human beings... Deities guard him... if unable to reach higher... and attain Arahantship, then when he falls from this life, he reappears in the Brahma World as one who wakes up from sleep.<sup>55</sup>

A little further enquiry into *mettā* will bring out some crucial points for an understanding of the Buddhist attitude(s) towards ritual. There exists in the Pali Canon a short text known as the *Mettā Sutta*. The following excerpt will convey its essential character:

Joyful and safe let every creature's heart rejoice. Whatever breathing beings there are, no matter whether frail or firm, with none excepted...<sup>56</sup>

This sutta is one of several from the Pali Canon which have been used since the Buddha's day as *paritta* – a Pali word meaning 'protection'; the equivalent Sinhalese word is *pirit*.<sup>57</sup> As Gombrich<sup>58</sup> and Spiro<sup>59</sup> attest, a significant feature of the laity's engagement with Buddhism (in Sri Lanka and Burma respectively) is to host a group of monks who will chant *paritta* for their benefit. Gombrich describes the divergent attitudes in contemporary Sri Lanka regarding how this 'benefit' accrues:

Most people regard *pirit* simply as a means to bring luck and avert misfortune; it thus appears to them as an impeccably Buddhist ritual for this-worldly benefits. Sophisticated Buddhists will point out that some of the texts address potentially malevolent spirits and preach Buddhist compassion to them; for the sponsors and human audience, they will say, the ceremony only works in so far as their participation manifests their virtuous intentions. What to the sophisticated has a spiritual application can be interpreted by simple people as a form of white magic.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Maha Boowa, *The Venerable Phra Acharn Mun Bhuridatta Thera* (Bangkok: Funny Publishing, 1982) p.97. A different translation of this book is available for download from: [http://www.buddhanet.net/pdf\\_file/acariya-mun-bio.pdf](http://www.buddhanet.net/pdf_file/acariya-mun-bio.pdf) (checked 10th May 2006). The passage cited appears on p.186 of this version.

<sup>54</sup> *Dhammapāda* verses 1 and 2 (p.1 and 5)

<sup>55</sup> *Visuddhi-Magga* IX.64 – 76 (pp.338-9)

<sup>56</sup> *Khuddakapāṭha* IX.4 (p.10); cf *Sutta-Nipāta* 1.8 (p.24)

<sup>57</sup> A translation of a Sinhalese 'Book of Protection' can be found at: [http://www.buddhanet.net/pdf\\_file/bkofprot.pdf&e=9797](http://www.buddhanet.net/pdf_file/bkofprot.pdf&e=9797) (checked 13 May 06).

<sup>58</sup> Gombrich (1971) pp147 – 8

<sup>59</sup> Spiro, Melford, *Buddhism and Society – A Great Tradition and its Burmese Vicissitudes* (New York: Harper, 1970) p.143 – 153

<sup>60</sup> Gombrich (1971) p.148.

## Spiro's Three Forms of Buddhism

At this point it will be useful to introduce a categorisation of Buddhism into three types, proposed by Spiro.<sup>61</sup>

Spiro's Category	Orientation	Characteristic Activity/ orientation
Apotropaic Buddhism	Non-soteriological	Involvement in magical ritual so as to ward off danger
Kammatic Buddhism	Soteriological	Skilful kammic action so as to improve one's situation in samsara
Nibbanic Buddhism	Soteriological	Entire Buddhist path, so as to realise <i>nibbāna</i> .

Spiro's first category comprises all activities which are seen solely "as a means to bring luck and avert misfortune" as Gombrich puts it. Spiro dubs this *apotropaic* Buddhism, from the Greek for 'turning away evil'.

Then he considers that there are two soteriological forms – two forms, that is, which are concerned with salvation from the *underlying* problems of life in samsara.

Of these, *kammatic* Buddhism is based on the principle of 'do good works and go to heaven'. One is aiming to improve one's standing on the wheel of birth and death; to avoid harming others and to do good where possible, thereby to win rebirth in heaven.

And finally, *nibbanic* Buddhism is directed towards the ultimate realisation which the Buddha strove to bring to people – that there is a beyond of conditioned existence, *nibbāna*.

Though I would not subscribe to some of the comments Spiro makes as he wields this 3-fold schema, it nonetheless strikes me as a form of analysis which could help to illuminate the motivations people bring to theurgy and divination. On which note, it may be of interest to remark Iamblichus's comment:

Nor do the theurgists "pester the divine intellect about small matters," but about matters pertaining to the purification, liberation and salvation of the soul.<sup>62</sup>

We might infer from this that he would wish to reserve the title 'theurgist' for those whose motivations fit under Spiro's *kammatic* and *nibbanic* categories.

It is of course easy, once armed with a set of categories, to forget the messiness of reality. Spiro himself says:

... I do not wish to suggest that living Buddhism presents itself as packaged into three neat bundles of belief and practice. On the contrary, when first encountered, living Buddhism appears as a bewildering hodgepodge of beliefs and practices...<sup>63</sup>

He goes on to recount the following story, which begins to show how different forms (*apotropaic* and *kammatic* in what follows) can overlap. A snake entered a Burmese villager's house. This is traditionally seen as a very bad omen. In order to remedy the situation, the monk had told the villager to distribute a hundred snake-shaped cookies amongst the local children. Upon receiving their cookie, each child was to say "It's better!" "so that instead of being an omen of misfortune the serpent became an omen of good fortune." It is worth quoting Spiro on this at some length:

This is an obvious case of sympathetic magic, in which external events are thought to be changed by a ritual simulating the change. It is interpreted in Buddhist terms, however, to render it compatible with the belief in merit and karma. Thus in response to my query, after admitting that the snake itself was not the cause but a sign of impending danger, the monk again affirmed, in response to my further query, that karma cannot be altered in this primitive magical manner (so reminiscent of the biblical story of Rachel and the

<sup>61</sup> Spiro (1970) p.12.

<sup>62</sup> Iamblichus, tr. Clarke, Emma C et al, *On the Mysteries* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003) 293, p.353.

<sup>63</sup> Spiro (1970) p.12

mandrakes). Rather, he said, by distributing these cookies among the children, the villager had performed an act of *dāna* [generosity] whose merit importantly changed his karmic balance. This merit, he explained in an interesting metaphor, 'is like providing supports for a weak structure that is about to fall. Without the supports it would certainly fall; the supports prevent this from happening.' The metaphor, given the monk's belief in the neutralization of karma, is appropriate, but his use of the karmic idiom to legitimize a primitive magical rite is an obvious rationalization.<sup>64</sup>

It seems to me that, at this point, limitations in Spiro's understanding of Buddhist philosophy prevent him from seeing how well the monk's actions fit with the Buddha's approach as we find it in the Pali Canon. This point is worth dwelling on, for it raises a central issue regarding the nature of kamma:

### **Kamma and Inevitability**

Spiro's view of kamma emerges when he describes villagers performing rituals to ward off problems they see coming through astrology or other omens. He says that this is contradictory, since "karmic causation... is both inevitable and immutable"<sup>65</sup>

He also reports, however, that "the more thoughtful among" the villagers hold that planetary influences and so on are not causes of impending danger, but *signs*; and that "Planets can indeed cause trouble, but only to those whose karma is bad. Those whose karmic state is good cannot be affected by planetary danger."<sup>66</sup> This is in fact more consistent with the Buddha's teaching on kamma than Spiro's own interpretation.

Kamma was not described by the Buddha as either ubiquitous or (in most cases) immutable. It is not ubiquitous because it is only one of five natural orders (*niyāmas*) in play in the world.<sup>67</sup> It is not immutable because it is seen, like everything else, as a conditioned phenomenon – constantly interacting with and being defined by phenomena which impinge upon it.<sup>68</sup> Kammically skilful action performed in the present *tends* to prevent the individual from experiencing the worst effects of past unskilful actions. Sāriputta's near immunity to the *yakkha*'s blow is an example. It also tends to open the way for the results of past skilful actions to manifest.

This brings us to a crucial point. Under the Buddhist view, the operation of the law of kamma tends to mean that the universe emphasises and supports whatever I do, be it well- or ill- advised. The quality of my actions sets up (as it were) a certain resonance in me, and there is a *tendency* for gods or demons to respond to that, exaggerating the power of my movements. Ethical actions come with power steering as standard, so to speak. In a world where kamma is only one of five natural orders, in which kammic resultants (*vipāka*) from the distant past may also come to fruition at a given time, and in which other beings are also taking kammic actions, this cannot be more than a tendency, however. It is still entirely possible for bad things to happen to (currently) good people and vice-versa.

### **The Buddha on Ritual**

Ritual is often seen as a way to interact with the gods. The Buddha's attitude here needs to be scrutinised closely. He taught that attachment to rite and ritual is a fetter which needs to be overcome on the spiritual path.<sup>69</sup> He encouraged people not to trust in the efficacy of ritual actions – thus for example when the Brahmin Sundarika Bharadvāja asked about the efficacy of bathing in sacred rivers, the Buddha mentioned some of the leading sacred rivers of his time and remarked, "A fool may there forever bathe, yet will not purify dark deeds."<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Spiro (1970) p.158.

<sup>65</sup> Spiro (1970) p.155.

<sup>66</sup> Spiro (1970) p.156.

<sup>67</sup> A detailed text on this subject: Ledi Sayadaw, *The Niyāma Dipāni*, can be downloaded from: <http://buddhistinformation.com/niyama%20dipaini.htm> (checked 21<sup>st</sup> May 2006).

<sup>68</sup> See the discussion of different categories of kamma at Visuddhi-Magga Ch.XIX. There is one class, *garuka* (weighty) kamma which has sufficient inevitability that it will manifest during a given lifetime; but this is the exception, not the rule.

<sup>69</sup> E.g. *Dīgha Nikāya* iii.216 (p.484).

<sup>70</sup> *Majjhima Nikāya* i.39 (p.121).

He then, however, encouraged the Brahmin to negotiate a change from the ritual form as he understood it, to what is effectively kammatic Buddhism, whilst retaining the familiar 'bathing' imagery:

It is here, Brahmin, that you should bathe  
To make yourself a refuge for all beings.  
And if you speak no falsehood  
Nor work harm for living beings,  
Nor take what is offered not,  
With faith and free from avarice,  
What need for you to go to Gayā?  
For any well will be your Gayā.<sup>71</sup>

Such examples could be multiplied, but one more will suffice for now. The Buddha found Sigālaka, early in the morning, paying homage to the six directions with wet hair and clothes and joined palms. When asked what he was doing, Sigālaka explained that this ritual was something his father, on his deathbed, asked him to perform regularly.

The Buddha said, "But, householder's son, that is not the right way to pay homage to the six directions according to the Ariyan discipline." Sigālaka naturally asked him what would be the right way, whereon the Buddha outlined a moral framework – full of commonsense advice such as save some money for a rainy day, beware of friends who are 'all take', and so on – all fitted into the framework of the six directions. For instance, Sigālaka was told that he should see his wife as the western direction, and pay homage to the west by honouring his wife, not disparaging her, not being unfaithful, giving authority to her, and sometimes buying her jewellery.<sup>72</sup>

The following points can be noted *a propos* the Buddha's attitude to ritual:

- Involvement with it is seen as a problem insofar as this involves a belief that the simple, mechanical actions (e.g. bathing in a river or genuflecting to the six directions) are helpful in themselves.
- The Buddha is happy to use the imagery of a ritual which is familiar to someone, but he will rework it so that what the practitioner is doing is actually some part (at least) of the Buddhist path, albeit packaged in the ritual form. This is what Spiro's monk was doing with his cookie-ritual.
- Although the Buddha gave a number of verses which could be recited, such as the *Mettā Sutta*, these were not intended for simple repetition, but rather as an exhortation and basis for enquiry and work on oneself. Regarding the development of *mettā*, for instance, the Buddha once mentioned to his monks that, "...even if bandits were to sever you savagely limb by limb with a two-handed saw, he who gave rise to a mind of hate towards them would not be carrying out my teaching."<sup>73</sup> The aim, then, was to be able to maintain a 'mind of friendliness' *in extremis*, which is unlikely to be accomplished by simple repetition of a text.

So the point is not that rituals are good or bad *per se*, but rather that they are of use only to the extent that they serve as a vehicle to engage the heart and mind of the practitioner. Attitude is all-important and, as it is put in a late Theravadan text, "it is through his own fault that (a man) makes barren a *parittā*".<sup>74</sup> We can note here a conflicting statement – effectively '*ex opere operato*' – from Iamblichus:

...it is the accomplishment of acts not to be divulged and beyond all conception, and the power of the unutterable symbols, understood solely by the gods, which establishes theurgic union.... even when we are not engaged in intellection, the symbols themselves, by themselves, perform their appropriate work, and the ineffable power of the gods, to whom these symbols relate, itself recognises the proper images of itself, not through being aroused by our thought.<sup>75</sup>

<sup>71</sup> *Majjhima Nikāya* i.39 (p.121).

<sup>72</sup> *Dīgha Nikāya* Sta 31.

<sup>73</sup> *Majjhima Nikāya* i.129 (p.223)

<sup>74</sup> Horner, I.B., *Milinda's Questions (Vol.1)* (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1963) p.217. NB that IB Horner translates '*paritta*' as 'safety rune' here.

<sup>75</sup> Iamblichus (2003) 97, p.115.

As Shaw notes, however, "Iamblichus believed that the power of these symbols could not be tapped without the moral and intellectual preparation of the theurgist."<sup>76</sup> A passage previously quoted (see note 52) also supports this view of Iamblichus's thought.

### Skilful Means

It can be noted that the Buddha said nothing about the realisation of *nibbāna* to Sundarika Bharadvājā or Sigālaka, even though this is the ultimate focus and purpose of his teaching. He was, as remarked earlier, aware that most people would misunderstand his message – to the extent that he nearly decided not to teach in the first place. He therefore used what he called 'gradual training' – which is to say, only teaching people the things which would actually be comprehensible and useful to them at that particular time, and moving on to more abstruse aspects of the teaching when their minds were ready.<sup>77</sup> As already discussed, this pragmatic approach also extended to the Buddha's being prepared to use whatever came to hand – such as a pre-existing belief in the efficacy of some particular ritual – in order to make his teaching accessible to the hearer.

All of this illustrates the Buddha's use of what is known as 'skilful means'. Let me quote the Buddhist scholar Paul Williams on this:

Broadly speaking, the doctrine of skilful means maintains that the Buddha himself adapted his teaching to the level of his hearers. Thus most, if not all, of the Buddha's teachings have a relative value and only a relative truth. They are to be used like ladders, or, to use an age-old Buddhist image, like a raft employed to cross a river. There is no point in carrying the raft once the journey has been completed and its function fulfilled. When used, such a teaching transcends itself.<sup>78</sup>

Although 'skilful means' is widely seen as a Mahayana development,<sup>79</sup> it is present in the earlier Theravadan texts too. The following episode from the Pali Canon illustrates how radical a form the means might assume:

Nanda was a cousin of the Buddha. He had ordained as a monk but soon after his ordination told the monks:

I, friends, lead the *Brahmacariya* without finding delight (therein); I am unable to continue the *Brahmacariya* properly. I will disavow the training and revert to the lower life." don't enjoy leading the holy life, my friends. I can't endure the holy life. Giving up the training, I will return to the household life.

The Buddha asked him why this was. Nanda replied:

The Sakyan lady, to me, Lord, the loveliest in the land, looked on, with hair half-combed as I was coming out of the house and said this to me: 'May you come back swiftly, master' (The commentary tells us that the stumbling language here reflects Nanda's confusion.)<sup>80</sup>

The Buddha showed Nanda the Tavatimsa heaven realm, and in particular, 500 nymphs known as the 'dove-footed', who were waiting upon Sakka, king of the devas. He asked Nanda how the Sakyan girl who he was pining for compared to the nymphs, and Nanda told him,

It is as if she were that mutilated monkey, Lord, with ears and nose cut off – just so, Lord, is that Sakyan lady, the loveliest in the land, when contrasted with these five hundred nymphs. She does not even come anywhere near enumeration, does not even come anywhere near a fractional part, does not even come anywhere near contrast (with them). Rather, it is these five hundred nymphs who are not only the more excessively beautiful and the more fair to behold but also the more to inspire serenity.<sup>81</sup>

The Buddha then guaranteed Nanda the five hundred nymphs, whereon Nanda said he would return to the order of monks and Brahma-faring, and even take delight therein. However his fellow monks

<sup>76</sup> Shaw (1995) p.85

<sup>77</sup> E.g. at *Majjhima-Nikāya* i.379 (p.485)

<sup>78</sup> Williams, Paul, *Mahayana Buddhism – the Doctrinal Foundations* (London: Routledge, 1989) p.143.

<sup>79</sup> See e.g. Pye, Michael, *Skilful Means – A Concept in Mahayana Buddhism (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.)* (London: Routledge, 2003). This is probably the primary text on the subject.

<sup>80</sup> See Masefield (1994) p.56 n.9.

<sup>81</sup> *Udāna* 3.2 (pp.40-41)

came to hear of the reason for his new-found motivation, and taunted him. Ashamed, he resolved to show them that he was not such a lightweight as they thought, began pursuing the practice diligently, and became enlightened in no long time.

So 'skilful means' can extend to tactics which look very much like trickery, but always with the aim of bringing about whatever is the best outcome currently possible for a given person.<sup>82</sup> That this highly pragmatic, context-sensitive approach should be a viable, indeed unavoidable, part of the Buddhist approach can be seen to follow from Buddhist epistemology.

### **Buddhist Epistemology**

The project of coming to know everything there is to know about the world is emphatically and repeatedly rejected by the Buddha as something which is impossible and in fact leads to madness.<sup>83</sup>

In the formulation of condition-dependent origination, all things are defined as arising from ignorance.<sup>84</sup> To realise *nibbāna* is to have destroyed ignorance, but this does not imply omniscience – unless omniscience is defined as knowing everything that *needs* to be known.

Further, it can be noted that the intersection of the worlds of the gods with ours can yield epistemological anomalies:

Bhikkhus, once in the past a certain man set out from Rājagaha and went to the Sumāgadhā Lotus Pond, thinking: 'I will reflect about the world'... Then, bhikkhus, the man saw a four-division army entering a lotus-stalk on the bank of the pond. Having seen this, he thought: 'I must be mad! I must be insane! I've seen something that doesn't exist in the world.' [...] Nevertheless, bhikkhus, what that man saw was actually real, not unreal. Once in the past the devas and the asuras were arrayed for battle. In that battle the devas won and the asuras were defeated. In their defeat, the asuras were frightened and entered the asura city through the lotus stalk, to the bewilderment of the devas.<sup>85</sup>

Our world and the worlds of the gods work under different laws, and this may be taken to imply that we should not expect interventions in our lives by the gods to necessarily take a straightforwardly comprehensible form. For instance, it may be a mistake to expect divination to provide straightforwardly factual information on demand. A parallel with Iamblichus again suggests itself here:

Whenever it is necessary for the soul to exercise virtue, and ignorance of the future contributes to this, the Gods conceal the things that will happen in order to make the soul better.<sup>86</sup>

And compare also Albertus Magnus:

...When the signifiers are equal in good fortune and evil, the counsel of the profession of the stars is to abandon the interrogation since God wished to keep it hidden from us.<sup>87</sup>

Or indeed 1 Samuel 14.37:

God did not answer him that day.

Divinatory knowledge, whether conceived as coming from God or gods, may not be simply available on-demand. In light of the Buddha's interaction with Nanda, where an element of misdirection was surely involved, we might question whether it can be part of divination's function to give an answer *because of the effect it will produce*, rather than because it is necessarily factual.

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<sup>82</sup> Cf note 9 – the highest good possible might be to attain a heavenly rebirth, *if* the person is not capable of realising enlightenment or taking steps towards doing so.

<sup>83</sup> See the discussion of the term *avyākata* in Gethin (1998), pp.66 - 8.

<sup>84</sup> For discussion of condition-dependent origination see Gethin (1998) pp.141-3; he quotes the formulation of dependent origination from *Samyutta Nikāya* ii.25 (p.550).

<sup>85</sup> *Samyutta Nikāya* v.446 (p.1864).

<sup>86</sup> Iamblichus, *De Mysteriis* 289.17 – this translation from Shaw (1995) p.234.

<sup>87</sup> Albertus Magnus, 'Speculum Astronomiae' in *The Speculum Astronomiae and Its Enigma – Astrology, Theology and Science in Albertus Magnus and His Contemporaries*, ed. Robert S. Cohen, Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1992, p.267. Thanks to Sue Toohey, who pointed this out to me. The quotation can be found in her article: *And Let Them Be for Signs: Albertus Magnus & Prognostication by the Stars*, <http://www.skyscript.co.uk/magnus.html> (Checked 4th January 2007).

Of course this relies on a major inference, namely, that if the Buddha behaved in such a way, the gods – or some of them, at least – might do likewise. There may be some conversation for astrologers and other diviners to have here, though I suspect the issue may ultimately be imponderable for the reason articulated by Patrick Curry when he refers to the act of diving as

a 'foretelling' the reception of which cannot but affect what it foretells. (This is true even if, as with Oedipus, the efforts to evade it are instrumental in its realization.) Thus every prediction is also an intervention.<sup>88</sup>

Curry makes a further observation which is to the point here during a discussion of western philosophy's development. He suggests that divination is inevitably at odds with the philosophical tradition insofar as divination is grounded in *metis* rather than *episteme* – that is to say, it deals with a truth which is "multiple, perspectival and particular" rather than "unitary, universal and abstract".<sup>89</sup> He explicitly equates *metis* with skilful means at this point in his argument.

## Ethics

The point has emerged that ethical action (skilful *kamma*) tends, all things being equal, to bring one friendship with gods rather than demons. Given this, we might expect that an ethical lifestyle would also assist divination. And indeed, in the fourth century CE the astrologer Firmicus Maternus wrote:

...shape yourself in the image and likeness of divinity, so that you may always be a model of excellence. He who daily speaks about the gods or with the gods must shape his mind to approach the likeness of divinity.<sup>90</sup>

A theme which the astrologer William Lilly reiterated in the seventeenth century CE:

...the more holy thou art; and more neer to God, the purer Judgment thou shalt give [...] As thou daily conversest with the heavens, so instruct and form thy minde according to the image of Divinity<sup>91</sup>

We might consider the case of the Buddha's cousin Devadatta to support this advice by showing what happens when it is not followed. Having gained supernatural powers, he

...became overwhelmed with gain, honour and renown. Ambition obsessed his mind, and the wish arose in him; "I will rule the Community of Bhikkhus [monks]". Simultaneously with the thought his supernormal powers vanished.<sup>92</sup>

It might be objected that by introducing Devadatta as an example I am in danger of equating divination with supernormal powers such as shape-shifting.<sup>93</sup> I believe this issue can, however, be addressed.

In the Buddha's 'Eightfold Path'<sup>94</sup> *Sīla* (Ethics or Discipline) forms the basis upon which *samādhi* (meditation) and *paññā* (wisdom) are developed. Simply put, under the heading of *sīla* one develops unselfish behaviour; as this becomes established as a way of being in the world, so it becomes possible for *samādhi* (the practice of meditation) to deepen. This is because meditation requires an ability to simply observe experience with equanimity – that is to say, without reacting to unusual experiences in a self-concerned way.

A component part of *samādhi* is concentration. If increasingly deep levels of concentration are pursued for their own sake, the meditator is on the path of *samatha* meditation – which leads to the *jhāna* states mentioned earlier, via which the various magical powers are developed. Concentration can also, however, be used as a tool with which to observe transience in mind and matter. This is the path of *vipassanā* meditation – leading to the insight which destroys ignorance, whereat *nibbāna* is revealed.

<sup>88</sup> Curry in Willis, Roy & Curry, Patrick, *Astrology, Science and Culture* (Oxford: Berg, 2004) p.55.

<sup>89</sup> Curry in Willis & Curry (2004) p.105.

<sup>90</sup> Firmicus Maternus tr. Rhys Bram, Jean, *Matheseos Libri VIII* (Nottingham: Ascella, 1995) 2.30 p.57.

<sup>91</sup> Lilly, William, *Christian Astrology* (London: Regulus, 1985), p.9 ('To the Student in Astrology').

<sup>92</sup> Ñānamoli (1972) p.258-9. Original source is the *Vinaya, Cullavagga* Ch.7.

<sup>93</sup> In the episode just cited, Devadatta impresses Prince Ajātasattu by appearing in his lap as a child with a girdle of snakes.

<sup>94</sup> See Gethin (1998) pp.81-3.



Given that *sīla* is the foundation of both *samatha* and *vipassanā*, it can therefore be said that selfish behaviour is fundamentally destructive of all forms of 'god-work'. As we have seen, although ethical conduct can be practised as a way to get good things in the future (including rebirth amongst the gods), this is not the most important thing so far as the Buddha is concerned. Buddha-Dhamma sets ethical conduct in a context of reducing and weakening the 'self' one believes to exist – and as such it is all of a piece with the path leading to the insight which Kapilavaddho expressed:

I [am] part of my world and my world [is] part of me. We co-exist[ed] interdependently<sup>95</sup>

## Two Kinds of Truth

A consequence of this greater reality which lies beyond separate self-hood is that there is a dichotomy between the world as we generally experience it, of which our separate self-hood is a foundational assumption, and the world as it actually is, in which the only reality 'self' has is that of an idea which arises and passes like everything else. After discussing matters relating to the individual self, the Buddha often voices a disclaimer along these lines:

...these are merely names, expressions, turns of speech, designations in common use in the world, which the Tathāgata [Buddha] uses without misapprehending them.<sup>96</sup>

In Buddhist doctrine, consequently, two kinds of truth – conventional truth and ultimate truth – are distinguished.<sup>97</sup> It can be noted – and no more, here – that there are, as McEvelley points out, interesting parallels between this aspect of Buddhist philosophy, and the Pyrrhonism of Sextus Empiricus.<sup>98</sup>

## The Reality of Gods

This discussion opens the way for us to consider the question of whether the gods in Buddhism should be taken as real entities, or as a way of articulating psychological principles. For example the Buddha said,

In conceiving, one is bound by Māra; by not conceiving, one is freed from the Evil One.<sup>99</sup>

'Conceiving' (*maññati*) in this sentence means, roughly, thinking in a self-centred way.<sup>100</sup> The Buddha's words seem to imply that one has no need to think of Māra, but only to look to one's own actions. Which might remind us of the monk's remark to Gombrich, "Gods are nothing to do with religion."<sup>101</sup>

Whilst, however, it would be possible to say that the gods do not exist at all in Buddhism, this would only be true at the ultimate level of truth – that is to say, it is true in exactly the same way as it is true that you or I have no permanent, separate, 'self' and therefore in this precise sense 'do not exist'. At the conventional level of truth, both we and the gods exist, and indeed it is considered an aspect of mundane wisdom to recognise that the human world is only one of many, and that rebirth takes place in other worlds dependent on the resultants of kamma.

## The Gods' Appearance is Negotiable

Another issue relating to the 'reality' of the gods can be mentioned here. A repeating motif in the Pali Canon is that a god will appear, and initially is described as being "of beautiful appearance, illuminating the entire grove".<sup>102</sup> Yet when they present themselves to the Buddha, they pay

<sup>95</sup> See note 28.

<sup>96</sup> *Dīgha Nikāya* i.202; p.169.

<sup>97</sup> See article 'Paramattha' in Nyanatiloka (1980) p.152-3.

<sup>98</sup> McEvelley, Thomas, *The Shape of Ancient Thought* (New York: Allworth Press, 2002) p.474. See also McEvelley's 'Early Greek Philosophy and Mādhyamika' in *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 31, No. 2. (Apr., 1981), pp. 141-164.

<sup>99</sup> *Samyutta Nikāya* iv.202 (p.1258).

<sup>100</sup> This is the subject of *Majjhima Nikāya* Sutta 1; see particularly Bhikkhu Bodhi's note 6 (p.1162).

<sup>101</sup> Gombrich (1971) p.46.

<sup>102</sup> E.g. *Majjhima Nikāya* iii.262, p.1112.

homage to him and stand respectfully at one side – having, it seems, assumed a human form in order to be able to interact fully in the human world.

And the Canon records that, in a similar way,

...whenever Brahmā Sanankumāra appears to the Thirty-Three Gods, he appears having assumed a grosser form, because his natural appearance is not such as to be perceptible to their eyes.<sup>103</sup>

The point I wish to draw from this is that the gods may have the wherewithal to interact with humanity through a host of different guises. A Norse god, a Roman god, or an archetype – it may not matter so much how we conceptualise the gods.

Although it is a little way off our theme, I think it is worth quoting from an interview I recorded in 1998 with a member of a ritual magical order who asked to be identified only as 'JP'. In discussing the rituals he was involved with he mentioned rituals which invoked archangels, elementals – and characters from Tolkien's *Silmarillion*. I asked him about the reality of working with what are clearly, in the last case, fictional characters. Part of his reply follows.

JP: ...If all these things were just words, and nothing else (which the sceptic would say) then you might as well recite 'Three Blind Mice'. But Tolkien was effectively describing the story of creation – but he didn't use the names Michael, Gabriel, Uriel – instead of the word 'archangel' he used 'Vallah' – but nonetheless he was describing those entities, just using another name. So people sitting around in a circle and using those names and using the intent which came through with Tolkien – it works perfectly well. You could work these rituals with someone representing Jupiter, somebody representing Mars, somebody representing Neptune – it's the same forces, it's just putting a different name on them. I'm sure you could create a ritual using characters from 'The Archers' if you wanted to, because they are all archetypes.<sup>104</sup>

This way of thinking certainly puts responsibility for theurgic practices on the shoulders of the individual human practitioner. And taking responsibility for one's actions was always a key message of the Buddha:

...you should live as islands unto yourselves, being your own refuge, with no one else as your refuge...<sup>105</sup>

This, of course, begs the question of whether we have free-will.

### **Fate and Free-will**

The law of kamma as propounded by the Buddha can easily be misinterpreted as entailing determinism for the individual being. This is not the place to give a full treatment of the issue as it emerges in the Pali Canon; the interested reader will find a good introduction in a paper by Luis O Gómez.<sup>106</sup> What is more to the point for the current paper is to note that the spectre of determinism has dogged astrology – for determinism is rarely seen as a *good* thing. Although the astrologer Marcus Manilius could write, around 15CE,

Set free your minds, O mortals, banish your cares, and rid your lives of all this vain complaint! Fate rules the world, all things stand fixed by its immutable laws, and the long ages are assigned by a predestined course of events.<sup>107</sup>

This has hardly been a popular outlook. Let St Augustine represent, here, the protest which has often been raised against astrology because of the determinist implications it is often seen to have:

For sweet it is to praise the Lord and say 'Have mercy on me; bring healing to a soul that has sinned against you'... This truth is our whole salvation, but the astrologers try to do away with it. They tell us that the

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<sup>103</sup> *Dīgha Nikāya* ii.210, p.295.

<sup>104</sup> Unpublished interview – recorded for, but not cited in, Phillipson (2000).

<sup>105</sup> *Dīgha Nikāya* ii.102, p.245.

<sup>106</sup> Gómez, Luis O, 'Some Aspects of the Free-Will Question in the Nikāyas', *Philosophy East and West*, Vol.25 No.1 (Jan 1975), pp.81-90.

<sup>107</sup> Manilius, tr. Goold, G.P., *Astronomica* (Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press, 1997) p.223 (Book 4.10).

cause of sin is determined in the heavens and we cannot escape it, and that this or that is the work of Venus or Saturn or Mars.<sup>108</sup>

I want to suggest that the two levels of truth make it possible to say that although (at the ultimate level) everything is conditioned, and therefore in a sense 'fated', at that level there are no separate selves to be fated and therefore the problem collapses. At the conventional level, where individual selves seem to be real, the power of free will which our selves appear to have is real – at least, every bit as real as those selves.

It is another diversion from a strictly Buddhist interpretation, but I hope an interesting one, to note the following from the contemporary teacher of *Advaita*, Ramesh S Balsekar:

...you must act in life *as if* you are the doer, knowing that you are *not* the doer. The human being lives on fictions. [...] So the understanding is that all this is an illusion and that you do not have any free will, but in life you must act as if you have free will.<sup>109</sup>

In Buddhism, then, questions of fate and free-will cannot (I have suggested) be answered unconditionally, but only in terms of the universe of discourse that is assumed to begin with. There is free will, and our actions can make a difference – but only within a certain frame of reference. This is a crucial issue when it comes to the path leading to enlightenment. It is of course considered necessary to apply oneself, but also to recognise that the ultimate goal of the path, enlightenment, is unconditioned and cannot therefore be caused by the efforts of the individual.

This theme, paradoxical and problematic as it is, receives little emphasis in the Pali Canon. It is present in a famous simile wherein the Buddha compares his teaching to a raft – useful for crossing a river, but to be let go of at the farther shore. His point is, "you should abandon even good states, how much more so bad states."<sup>110</sup> It may be read into the story of Ānanda's enlightenment (which occurred as he was lying down, after a long and strenuous period of meditation).<sup>111</sup> The theme receives much more emphasis in the Zen tradition. One example from a plethora of candidates:

To exert yourself in religious practice, trying to produce enlightenment by doing religious practices and zazen, is all wrong too. There's no difference between the mind of all the buddhas and the Buddha Mind of each one of you. But by wanting to realize enlightenment, you create a duality between the one who *realizes* enlightenment and what it is that's being realized.<sup>112</sup>

I want to suggest the following parallel. In Buddhism, it is considered necessary to apply oneself to the technique of meditation, whilst knowing that this cannot be sufficient to take one to the desired goal. In astrology (and doubtless other forms of divination too), it is not possible to arrive at accurate readings through individual effort alone. It is necessary to make the effort, to apply oneself to the technical apparatus of astrology, but also to acknowledge the need for something else – which might be thought of as God, or gods, or intuition – to intervene. This is not a view of astrology to which astrologers would unanimously subscribe – some believe that the subject is, or potentially can be, one where simply following the technical procedures is all that is required to attain the desired result. Under that view, astrology works *ex opere operato*, as it were. From my experience of interviewing western astrologers I would say that, whilst there are different views on how far technique alone can take an astrologer, the majority view is that something other than technique is needed for the craft to work to its best.

This is to couch the discussion in terms of praxis – how best to practise astrology or meditation. The nature of the subject is such that the discussion almost inevitably moves into a discussion of 'being' and, therefore, ontology. Inada remarks that,

Buddhist reality or ontology is dynamic, and its locus is in the momentary nows, however elusive, nebulous, and uncharacterizable they may be.<sup>113</sup>

<sup>108</sup> St Augustine (Tr. RS Pine-Coffin), *Confessions* (London: Penguin, 1961) p.73 (IV 3).

<sup>109</sup> Balsekar, Ramesh S., ed. Liquorman, Wayne, *Consciousness Speaks* (Redondo Beach: Advaita Press, 1992) p.333-4.

<sup>110</sup> *Majjhima Nikāya* i.135, p.229.

<sup>111</sup> Ñānamoli (1972) p.342; original source is the *Vinaya, Cullavagga*, 11.

<sup>112</sup> Bankei in: Haskel, Peter, *Bankei Zen* (New York: Grove Press, 1984) p.76.

<sup>113</sup> Inada, Kenneth K., 'The Range of Buddhist Ontology' in *Philosophy East and West*, Vol.38 No.3 (July 1988), pp266.

This is uncontroversial, but what may need to be emphasised is the emotional impact that accompanies the discovery of this nebulous reality. When meditators first get a glimpse of it, there is almost inevitably a strongly fearful reaction. Epstein, challenging Freud's assessment that meditation aims at no more than "oceanic feeling", a "restoration of limitless narcissism" and "resurrection of infantile helplessness", notes that

...the practice of mindfulness leads ultimately to a confrontation with the most highly cherished images of the self, a confrontation that is much more likely to be terrifying... than oceanic.<sup>114</sup>

In the *Visuddhi Magga* the meditative stage at which the true nature of reality begins to emerge into clear view is described by saying that that all experiences, both possible and actual, then appear to the individual

...in the form of a great terror, as lions, tigers, leopards, bears, hyenas, spirits, ogres, fierce bulls, savage dogs, rut-maddened wild elephants, hideous venomous serpents, thunderbolts, charnel grounds, battle fields, flaming coal pits, etc, appear to a timid man who wants to live in peace."<sup>115</sup>

The issue here is that at a deep, instinctive level I cling to my view of the world – no matter what my intellectual convictions. And the foundation of this view is that I am a separate 'self' – which is to say, something *not* altogether part of the world, but rather standing apart and exerting some control over the world. Confronting the fact of not being in control of one's world is painful. Two recent writers about Buddhism have chosen to illustrate this by quoting Beckett:

The old ego dies hard. Such as it was, a minister of dullness, it was also an agent of security.<sup>116</sup>

This identifies the problem with precision. In the Buddha's view, beings are attached to the idea of a permanent 'self' because it brings with it an illusion of control over the world, and therefore security. Meditative experience challenges this profoundly. I want to suggest that the experience of divination can also challenge it. When a reading strikes home, the experience is that this world (supposedly inanimate) just spoke to you. This can strike at quite a profound level, raising doubts about the solidity of one's epistemic ground. One group of astrologers has named this phenomenon the 'Blackett Judder', concerning which, Maggie Hyde writes:

...this is more than just a shiver down the spine. It is disturbing and unpleasant, a physically nauseous feeling, accompanied by disorientation and a mood of resistance. [...] The judder is like a parallax problem, a misalignment of reality which occurs when a person tries to fit disturbing experiences into their usual framework of how the world works. It is a severe type of what psychologists call cognitive dissonance, in which things feel askew in the attempt to fit together paradoxical possibilities."<sup>117</sup>

Just as 'meditation experiences' can be alternately (or even simultaneously) uplifting and terrifying, because they bring the individual face to face with what lies beyond individuality, so, I believe, there is something in the experience of divination's working – if clearly seen – which uplifts and terrifies.

The boundaries of the entity one believes oneself to be are shown to be unreal by the working of astrology, and by certain meditation experiences. I don't want to suggest that there is more than a parallel, a similarity, in the nature of these experiences. But in closing, there is one final question I should like to raise. In this paper we have considered some points of contact between the Buddhist path and divination: is it possible that divination can function as a spiritual path in itself?

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<sup>114</sup> Epstein, Mark, 'Beyond the Oceanic Feeling' in *The Couch and the Tree* (New York: North Point Press, 1998) p.126. The references to Freud are on p.120 and are from *Civilization and its Discontents*.

<sup>115</sup> *Visuddhi Magga* xxi.29, p.753.

<sup>116</sup> Foster, Paul, *Beckett and Zen* (London: Wisdom Publications, 1989) p.93; Epstein, Mark, *Going to Pieces without Falling Apart* (London: Thorsons, 1999) p.69.

<sup>117</sup> Hyde, Maggie, 'The Judder Effect – Astrology and Alternative Reality' in *The Astrological Journal*, Vol 43 No 5, Sept/Oct 2001, p.51-2.

In a recent paper Maggie Hyde makes this assertion:

Divination is concerned with being open to truth and the desire to do the right thing, and as such it seeks a moral pattern or principle.<sup>118</sup>

It seems clear enough that astrology, or any form of divination, *can* be misused for selfish purposes, at least in the short term. So what does it take for it to lead, rather, towards “a moral pattern or principle”? In Buddhism it is considered that the search for enlightenment begins with a glimpse of one of the three marks – transience, suffering, or non-self. If it is accepted that divination can provide experiences that can be called (loosely) experiences of non-self, then it has the potential to incline the individual towards a spiritual approach to life. But in order for divination to function in this way, it is essential that the ego’s attempts to assert that it is, after all, in control are undermined. *How* egoism is undermined will doubtless depend on the background of the individual.

For instance, the astrologer Robert Zoller spoke in an interview of the need of “subordinating the individual will to a higher will” in astrology, and also identified the temptation to avoid doing so:

I recently had reason to go to a *santero* in New Jersey – a practitioner of *santeria*, an Afro-Cuban religion. You go to them with a problem, and they begin their analysis with certain questions, and then they get out their cowrie beads and do a divination. At the beginning of the divination, and before every move in the divination, there is a prayer. Now contemporary occultism is quite capable of taking over the methods of the *santero* or any other traditional practitioner, keeping the strict technical aspects of what they do to arrive at their answers whilst, at the same time, excising the prayers.<sup>119</sup>

Zoller described this as an attempt to reduce divination to “some sort of totally secular and scientific endeavour”<sup>120</sup> such as mathematics, and was clear in his view that it is misguided:

I’ve been bitten at one time or another by the same parasite that bites those people who think that astrology can be reduced to a mathematical science. I have to confess that, even now, there is something I find appealing about that idea. That which is appealing about it, I think, comes down to inflation – the idea that ‘I can do something without anybody else permitting me to do it, without subordinating myself to anybody or anything.’ It’s the prelude to a song that goes to the tune, ‘The Hell with Everybody Else’. That attitude has existed for a long time, and it’s the demon behind our science essentially. I think it always falls flat on its face, because there is a faculty of the human mind that is a kind of wild card. Maybe it’s a faculty of more than the human mind; maybe it’s a faculty of the way *being* operates as a whole.<sup>121</sup>

I would suggest that there needs to be something mysterious, something beyond technical skill, in both divination and meditation. I believe it is this understanding which has the potential to turn divination into a discipline which gravitates towards a “moral pattern”. This seems to also be the import of Maggie Hyde’s statement:

Like all divination, the working of astrology is rooted in mystery. The participants are transformed by virtue of the mystery...<sup>122</sup>

## Conclusion

I have suggested that there is a great deal in common between ‘theurgy’ and ‘brahma-faring’. Brahma-faring admits of two interpretations – striving to join the gods, and striving to realise enlightenment. These map onto Spiro’s definitions of *kammatic* and *nibbanic* Buddhism, and are the objectives of *samatha* and *vipassanā* meditations, respectively. The clarity with which Buddhism distinguishes these two goals is one of that teaching’s distinguishing features. Although divination is only discussed incidentally in the Pali Canon, there is plenty of evidence to show that it was assumed to be a genuine phenomenon. I have suggested that divination, correctly understood, will involve the practitioner in *kammatic* work; and that the experience of divination can give a *nibbanic* turn to the endeavour, by pointing towards the ultimate unreality of ‘self’ as something separate from the universe; and thence towards Buddhism’s *summum bonum*, *nibbāna*.

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<sup>118</sup> Hyde, Maggie (2006) ‘Pigs and Fishes – Inner Truth in Divination’ (currently unpublished paper) p.3.

<sup>119</sup> Phillipson (2000), pp.190-1.

<sup>120</sup> Phillipson (2000) p.191.

<sup>121</sup> Phillipson (2000) pp184-5.

<sup>122</sup> Hyde (2006) p.10.

My thanks to José Cabezón, Rupert Gethin and Martin Wood for helpful suggestions about material for this paper.

### **Note on Pali Source Material**

References to volumes of the Pali Canon are given by volume and page number of the original texts published by the Pali Text Society (in the form 'ii.xx'), and by a page number which refers to a translation of the text. Unless otherwise noted, the translations referred to are as follows:

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