

Does Buddhism Attach Significant Importance to Supernatural Power?

In order to elicit faith and confidence in sentient beings so that they can better expound their teachings, Buddhas and bodhisattvas use their inconceivable power to display various supernatural powers. Therefore, supernatural power does exist in Buddhism. Sometimes it is necessary to display supernatural power to attract, teach and guide sentient beings with different dispositions or capabilities.

Supernatural power in Buddhism can be classified into six different types:

1. The supernatural power of unimpeded bodily action: The ability to fly and enter the ground; to freely traverse among the three realms in a single thought; and to transform between different sizes and from one to many or many to one, etc. at will.
2. The supernatural power of divine ears: The ability to hear all sounds in the mundane world including the suffering, happiness, worries, joys, and even languages of the various sentient beings in the six realms of rebirth.

3. The supernatural power of knowing another's mind: The ability to know clearly the various wholesome and unwholesome thoughts and mind states of other people.

4. The supernatural power of knowing one's former lives and the ability to know the former lives and events of other people as well.

5. The supernatural power of clairvoyance or divine eyes: The ability to see the suffering and happiness of sentient beings in the six paths of rebirth, as well as the paths they will be reborn to after their deaths.

6. The supernatural power of extinction of taints: The ability to eliminate all afflictions, including the affliction abandoned through vision and the affliction eradicated through cultivation. The ability to never be reborn in the three realms and to be forever liberated from the cycle of death-and-rebirth.

This last supernatural power of extinction of taints can only be realized by those Buddhist practitioners who have eliminated self-view and manifestations of self-attachment, namely, arhats in the Hīnayāna and the bodhisattvas who have attained the First-Ground or above in the Mahāyāna. It will not be realized by non-Buddhists or ordinary people.

Supernatural power can be acquired through three ways: by innate endowment, by karmic effect, or by practice. The innately endowed supernatural power is present at birth due to practice in

previous lives; however, this type of supernatural power will disappear if the person relinquishes the wholesome and pure way of life.

The supernatural powers acquired through karmic effect: the practitioner practiced and cultivated supernatural powers in past lives but the powers do not appear at birth; they will only naturally surface upon enlightenment through realizing the prajñā (transcendental wisdom) by following the Buddhist teachings.

The supernatural powers acquired through practice are attained through diligent cultivation in this life; they do not appear at birth because they have not been cultivated in past lives.

Supernatural powers are all states of mental consciousness. Their realization relies on meditative concentration followed by intensive practices. The states of supernatural powers of all sentient beings in the three realms are differentiated by the levels of realized meditative concentration.

Practitioners who wish to attain supernatural powers must relinquish lustful desire to bring forth the concentration state of the First Dhyāna (a state of meditative absorption). Those who have attained supernatural powers will soon lose them if they become fond of lustful desire again; the supernatural powers will return

when the practitioners reengage in their intensive efforts after abstaining from lustful desire.

The incantations used by ordinary people to prevent natural disasters like earthquakes or hurricanes are effective through the power of demons and spirits, not the individuals' supernatural power. Those who frequently elicit the powers of demons and spirits to help with their affairs will pay a painful price of uttering gibberish or balderdash on their deathbed. After death, most will fall into the path of demons and spirits due to their affinity with the five magical powers of demons and spirits. This is also due to their intervention in earthquakes, hurricanes or other natural disasters through the help of demons and spirits, which interferes with the causal effect of sentient beings' collective karma. Thus, they will fall into the path of demons and spirits after death due to the punishment of the dharma-protecting deities.

Supernatural powers are primarily associated with mental concentration. The Dharma realized by bodhisattvas is, however, prajñā or wisdom, not meditative concentration; therefore, it has nothing to do with supernatural powers. The cultivation of supernatural powers should be practiced in parallel with the realization of prajñā wisdom. As the level of realization in prajñā wisdom advances, one's supernatural powers will be stronger. Otherwise, knowing that someone possesses supernatural powers

and can communicate with them, the demons and spirits will ask the person to help handle their affairs. If the practitioner's power of merits and benevolence is not strong enough to tame them, it clearly is inevitable that the demons and spirits will continue to stay around and make use of the supernatural powers. Hence, the practitioner will be led further and further astray away from the Buddhist practice.

“Supernatural powers” should be the by-products of prajñā wisdom. Without the guidance of wisdom, supernatural powers will not benefit the practice and realization in Buddha's teachings. All Buddhas in the three lifetimes and ten directions do not attain Buddhahood through the practice of supernatural powers, the samādhis of various meditative concentrations, or the sole realization of the liberation way of the Two Vehicles; rather, Buddhahood is attained through the perfection of the knowledge-of-all-aspects.

Thus, Buddhism does not de-emphasize supernatural powers. They have their important role in the process of cultivating the way to Buddhahood; however, they are not the ultimate goals. In addition, they can be acquired much more easily with much less effort if they are cultivated after having established the foundation of wisdom and meditative concentration. Only then the exploitation

from the demons and spirits will not become an obstruction to a practitioner's own progress in cultivating the way to Buddhahood.

