

Do You Believe in Miracles?

Debating the Supernatural in Buddhism

INTRODUCTION BY ANDY KARR

The Transcendent Conqueror said:

The world may debate with me, but I do not debate with the world. Whatever is asserted to exist in the world, I will also assert to exist. Whatever is asserted not to exist in the world, I will also assert not to exist.

—from the *Ratnakuta Sutra* (*Heap of Jewels Sutra*)

Why does the Buddha go along with the world's opinions? Because he is not bound by concepts of existence and non-existence, of what is possible and what is not possible. If the world accepts magic and miracles, the Buddha teaches from that perspective. If the world accepts the laws of physics, he teaches from that perspective. From his own perspective, the Buddha holds no views about reality. That's why he's called the Transcendent Conqueror. We, on the other hand, are bound by our thoughts.

Our opinions about magic and miracles reveal a lot about our concepts of what is, and is not, possible in the phenomenal world. That's why this panel discussion is so important. When we examine and challenge our beliefs about reality, our subtle assumptions can be exposed, and we can see how we are bound by them.

As a teenager, I was entranced with Eugen Herrigel's wonderful book, *Zen in the Art of Archery*. His account of the archer hitting the center of the target in complete darkness intrigued me and inspired me to learn more about Zen. Later on, stories of the great yogi Milarepa's extraordinary combats with demons and logicians in the Land of Snows fueled my faith and enthusiasm for Buddhist practice. Even as they inspired me, these miraculous stories raised questions about the nature of reality that I've pondered for years.

I've found that we can take these reports of magic and miracles as sources of inspiration, and at the same time reflect on how such events could actually happen. This might seem contradictory, but in practice it is quite effective. If we ask ourselves, as these panelists do, are these stories allegories, symbolic representations, or factual descriptions? Do they contradict some inviolable natural laws? Are they fakes, fairy tales, or genuine achievements?—these contemplations can introduce chinks in the confining armor of our network of concepts.

One definition of miracles is that they are extraordinary events that go beyond natural or scientific laws. They are *supernatural*. In the ancient world, there was consensus about the natural and supernatural: the boundary between the two was fluid. People believed that unseen beings inhabited and animated the landscape, and that extraordinary individuals were capable of superhuman exploits. In those times, miraculous stories inspired faith and respect. They did not contradict deeply held beliefs about what was possible in the natural world. The ancients felt no need to question whether Brahma actually interceded with the Buddha to encourage him to turn the wheel of dharma. Stories that Nagarjuna lived for six hundred years and visited the realm of the nagas to retrieve the *Prajnaparamita Sutras* merely confirmed that his teachings were marvelous and true.

In this secular/scientific/rational/spiritual/postmodern modern age, things are not so simple. Tales of miraculous powers can inspire as much doubt as faith, and expose major fault lines in our culture. We need to turn this confusion to our advantage by using the conflict of views to arrive at the place beyond views. If we glimpse the way we cling to “exists” and “does not exist,” “possible” and “not possible,” and rest in the mind that is beyond such polarities, we can see what it is like to abandon all views and experience what Glenn Wallis refers to in the discussion as “a direct encounter with reality.” This is ultimately what the Buddha points out.

To a contemporary ear, the term “miracle” points to the supernatural and superhuman, the extraordinary and highly improbable, the amazing and outstanding. There is another sense of the word that could be more interesting for contemporary Buddhists. *Miracle* originally comes from the Latin *miraculum*, meaning “object of wonder.” I think all our panelists would agree that the greatest miracle is freedom from bondage, directly experiencing reality, fresh, just as it is. This is the miracle the Buddha continuously demonstrates.

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*According to popular
Zen/Chan lore, the 6th-century
Indian monk Bodhidharma
miraculously crossed the
Yangzi River on a reed.*

Bodhidharma (Daruma) on a Reed
Artist unknown
Japanese, 14th century

BUDDHADHARMA: Buddhism is known for its straightforward, almost hardheaded approach to reality, and many people in the West are drawn to Buddhism by what they see as its rationalism. Yet the texts of every Buddhist tradition contain descriptions of miraculous events and beings. How can we account for this apparent dichotomy?

GLENN WALLIS: The Buddhist teachings are indeed brutally oriented toward reality, and yet one finds lots of stories involving the supernatural and the miraculous. The literature seems to go in two different directions. One direction is close to the bone, down to earth, here and now. It's about knowing what's present and not speculating on flamboyant possibilities. In the other direction, you have language about clairvoyance, flying through the air, knowing past lives, and all that sort of thing.

David Snellgrove, the eminent Buddhist scholar, made a very interesting point that might be helpful in trying to appreciate the place of this latter kind of material in the tradition. Snellgrove said that, on the one hand, when we look at the biographical material of the Buddha we find a character who can read minds, is omniscient, and can perform incredible feats. On the other hand, we find very simple and straightforward teachings about cultivating the mind. But, Snellgrove says, it was precisely because of the faith that the Buddha was able to instill in his followers that we even know of him today. These devoted followers recorded the biographical data and fashioned the literary figure of the Buddha. This literature reflects the lives and the cultural realities of the people who compiled these texts. The people who were more interested in his ideas, and not in

narratives, didn't leave us with biographical material that was meant to instill faith and awe and reverence for the teachings. Rather, they just faithfully laid down the teachings.

We need to ask ourselves as Buddhists living today whether we can have it all. Can we both believe in the down-to-earth teachings and the miraculous phenomena—or is there some tension between them? We have to make some decisions about what principles to use to understand this material. Otherwise, Buddhism could just become “anything goes.”

ARI GOLDFIELD: The focus of Buddhism on the true nature of reality and the stories about miracles are not contradictory but rather mutually reinforcing. The wonderful thing about Buddhism is that it gives us a chance to understand stories about miracles, not just from the perspective of faith but also from the perspective of reason. My own teacher, Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso Rinpoche, puts it very simply: If you have the miraculous view, you can have faith in miracles.

What is the miraculous view? It's not a matter of whether we believe or we don't; we have to analyze for ourselves. We're taught by Nagarjuna and all the great masters of the Middle Way school how to analyze. This analysis helps us to see that outer objects don't truly exist. We can't find any objectively existent particle of matter. The things that appear to us are like appearances in dreams and, therefore, just as in a lucid dream, we can effect changes in the environment. The sort of person who has certainty in the view, and also realization through meditative experience, can indeed manipulate appearances in the outer world, and perform what we would call miracles for the benefit of others.

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Just prior to attaining enlightenment, the Buddha Shakyamuni is said to have fended off the many attacks of the demon Mara, which took the form of aggression and temptations.

Buddha Shakyamuni—Life Story
Artist and lineage unknown
Buryatia (Siberia), 19th century



events are possible. But what about in actual reality?

When we talk about stories of miracles and so forth, it's important to remember that we're talking about stories. And yes, we can start asking questions about how a given miracle functions in a story, what kind of response it is trying to catalyze in its audience. But to say that, given the nature of reality and the possibility of meditative accomplishment, such miracles should be possible is speculative. It's a story.

I've been around Buddhists for thirty-five years. I've never seen anything close to what we might call miraculous in that sense of manipulating reality. We all manipulate reality. It's why we have hands. It's why we have organs of speech. We can change things with our words and create new realities. In fact, we're master manipulators. That's one of our problems. But to say that we can manipulate reality in special ways unavailable to most people? Is that a rhetorical claim intended to attract people to certain teachings because of their power, or is it an actual claim about what's possible in the real world?

ARI GOLDFIELD: To say that the miracles we read about in the teachings are possible doesn't mean that one accepts *prima facie* all stories and

abandons one's intelligence. To my mind, Glenn brings up the need to look at any particular story from a pedagogical perspective. The great Tibetan yogi Milarepa said that miracles are performed for specific reasons: to reverse someone's lack of faith, to point out the fruition to a student, or to enhance one's own experience.

I've met people who have seen teachers perform miracles, and I've seen some things that I would consider quite extraordinary, things that would not happen normally. Naturally,

BUDDHADHARMA: When you talk about the analysis coming out of the Middle Way, the Madhyamaka, do mean something like Nagarjuna's statement, "To whomever emptiness is possible, all things are possible"?

ARI GOLDFIELD: Yes, very much so.

GLENN WALLIS: It's one thing to lay out premises establishing that the nature of reality is such and such and the capacity of realized meditators is such and such, so that logically, tautologically, we could say that miracles or supernatural



(ITEM NO. 514) COLLECTION OF RUBIN MUSEUM OF ART (ACC.# F 1996.29.5)

(Facing page) *The yogi Ghanṭapa, pictured in the sky with consort, causes a flood in order to punish the king Devapala (bottom center). The king appeals to the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara for refuge, who, shown below with one arm raised, stops the flow of water.*

Ghanṭapa with Consort
Artist unknown
Tibet, 19th century

these are personal experiences. They're not something that every single person in a room, or hundreds of thousands of people in a stadium, are all going to experience in exactly the same way. That never happens anyway. The teachings on the view tell us that each individual has their own perspective. There is no objective reality. What's perceived is based on someone's habitual tendencies of perception. When certain causes and conditions come together, such as a meeting of a teacher and a student in a proper way, a particular student may perceive something extraordinary. That's a miracle. For somebody else, it's not. They don't see anything.

Yes, that's contradictory, but reality is contradictory. What I've called "manipulation of reality" can be demystified. It's just a method on the path, but it can be very important in terms of showing a student the potential of mind. The enlightened nature that is the true nature of mind can display itself in a variety of ways. The potential of buddhanature is limitless.

JUDY LIEF: I would like to come at this from the perspective of respecting the time and place, the milieu, that stories emerge from. The older Buddhist stories come to us from the context of cultures that saw things very differently from the way we do. One has to ask why so many of the ancient cultures saw many more of what we would consider supernatural events. We live within a particular web of defined reality, which in some ways has become more and more narrow and one-dimensional. Whatever does not fit within that web of narrowly defined reality is considered either not to exist, to be impossible, or to be so extraordinary that it becomes an object of fascination and strangeness—an inspiration for bizarre behavior, perhaps. By contrast, in certain cultures, miracles seem to have been a part of what people perceived all of the time.

For our own time and place, we can indeed have a sense of the miraculous, leaving aside supernatural experience and dramatic miracles like walking on water or healing the sick. Quite simply, if you look at reality closely and directly from the meditative perspective, ordinary reality becomes more and more strange and miraculous.

BUDDHADHARMA: When you say that miracles were a part of what people perceived all of the time in older cultures, did you mean that more of what we would call miraculous events were

Spirits, unusual energies, and magic are part of the web of ordinary reality in many cultures and have been for a very long time. You have to wonder whether all those people are out of their minds, or if there is possibly a different reality happening. —Judy Lief

actually occurring, or that their worldview encompassed a more miraculous perception of ordinary events?

JUDY LIEF: In many cultures not so based on scientific materialism, people perceive a much thinner veil between different

modes of reality. In the modern world, we have much stronger borders around our defined reality. Spirits, unusual energies, magic and black magic, and so forth are just part of the web of ordinary reality in many cultures and have been for a very long time. So you have to wonder whether all those people are out of their minds, or if there is possibly a different reality happening.

GLENN WALLIS: Or is it possible that we're just talking about figures of speech, ways of speaking? Is it possible that talking about gods and so forth is just an indispensable element in people's vocabulary? We have lots of these in our own language. "God bless you," for example, does not necessarily profess any belief in God and the conveying of blessing. Or when we talk about having love in our heart, it is more poetic in function. It would be a mistake for some future historian to look back and say that we believed that love dwells in the actual physical heart.

In the literature of ancient India, it was necessary to advertise supernatural possibility. I just listened to a swami give a talk last week, and she started out talking about the clairvoyance and clairaudience of her teacher and how she herself also had such capacity. It occurred to me that her talk followed the rhetorical structure of an ancient text. It began by laying out supernatural wonders. I'm supposed to feel there's tremendous power in these teachings and that she therefore deserves my patronage and participation. But it never seems to come down to actually working with what's being posed in the claim. It ends with the claim itself, and that's what makes me wonder if ancient peoples just tended to talk in these terms, as more poetic, evocative ways of expressing themselves, rather than that they actually saw spirits and experienced miracles.

JUDY LIEF: There is clearly plenty of what we could simply call superstition. There is also a use of stories to try to explain our world, which is so very hard to explain in all its many

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—Glenn Wallis

dimensions. The explanation can be done poetically, or imagistically, as Glenn was saying. Or it could be done scientifically. Once we are trying to explain why things happen the way they do, we find there are all sorts of explanations possible for any event.

That said, I do think that some people just see things that we don't see. They assume that anyone should be able to perceive in that way, but in fact that's not always the case. I don't think it's just stories. It's also different ways of actually seeing the world.

GLENN WALLIS: That's verifiable. Anthropologists have made a career of interviewing people and discovering that they have different perceptions. They also have ways of talking that can complicate matters, particularly when they are translated into another language. But if we think in Buddhist terms of a direct encounter with reality, if I see a spirit under a tree, that would be a form arising in my eye. In a sense, it wouldn't make any difference whether it was a tree sprite or a nine-year-old child. It's my reactions to it—my thoughts, speech, and actions that derive from those reactions, and my emotional responses—that matter. Whatever appears is just a phenomenal manifestation that arises and persists for a while, dissolves, and disappears.

What do you do with it in the meantime? That's the big question for the Buddha. What do we do with phenomena as they appear? How do we react to them? What kind of lives do we make for ourselves, for others, in the phenomenal realm? The question of what's a phenomenon in one culture as opposed to another almost seems irrelevant in the light of the Buddha's basic teachings.

JUDY LIEF: I agree completely with you there. We have an injunction not to be fascinated with extraordinary experience and not to flee from uncomfortable and painful experience, but to see whatever experience arises with equal taste.

ARI GOLDFIELD: The main point is to work with the mind. The teachings talk about the common *siddhis*, or powers, and the extraordinary *siddhis*. The common *siddhis* are what we would

call supernatural powers—flying, walking through walls, and so forth. The extraordinary *siddhi* is *bodhichitta*, to realize the true nature of mind and to practice love and compassion. That's the real power we are looking for when we enter the dharma.

The real miracle is when you can work with negative emotions by practicing on the path, and discover compassion and wisdom, the true nature of mind. Beyond that, it's good not to pre-judge, because if you're open to things and do not reject the possibility of other people having these experiences, one's own experience becomes broader, and one becomes able to relate and connect with others with less judgment.

What we perceive stems a lot more from how we think than we realize. It's a mistake to come from the perspective of scientific materialism and have an idea of what is possible and what is not *a priori*, and project that back onto everything, and then go on to say that what someone in an ancient text was talking about wasn't real, but merely allegory. But even within the scientific way of seeing the world, we are running into paradoxes of perception. People who study quantum physics are finding particles spinning both ways at once and communicating instantaneously over vast distances. They are seeing how much the observer affects things.

Reality is inconceivable. And as Judy was saying, when you find miracles in everyday life, the whole distinction between what is and isn't a miracle breaks down. Whatever might help someone to develop their love and their compassion and their wisdom, that's a miracle. It might take the form of a simple conversation or the Buddha holding up a flower, or it might take another form that seems much more extraordinary, like Milarepa flying. Why not?

JUDY LIEF: One way of looking at the unexpected or the miraculous is that it can crack the tendency to reduce our world and freeze it. It can make us wonder, do we really know what's going on? Have our concepts encompassed what is reality?

GLENN WALLIS: What we're doing here is speculative and going in the direction of view. We do know what's going on. We have a direct perception of reality. We just have to open our eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, the mind, and there it is.

JUDY LIEF: We very often don't do that. We often don't open our mind.

GLENN WALLIS: If I see someone flying through the air, what I'm seeing is someone flying through the air. I'm not seeing a miracle. A miracle is a concept that's been applied to an event after the fact.

JUDY LIEF: The real point, though, is that it's helpful to have our fixed views interrupted, whether it's by someone flying through the air or something not quite so miraculous.

BUDDHADHARMA: Intensive meditation practice over time breaks down rigid conceptual categories and habits of perception and thought. The idea that we have continuous existence is broken through, for example. Many people would find breaking through those kinds of conceptual barriers understandable. But someone walking through a wall or being born from a lotus breaks a much larger kind of barrier. Is, in fact, the barrier to walking through walls simply conceptual?

ARI GOLDFIELD: Milarepa was approached by philosophers who thought he was just a stupid person claiming to have realization, and that he had no education and was a charlatan. He inquired whether he could ask these learned men a question, and they agreed. So he asked them, "What is the definition of earth?"

They laughed and said everybody knows that but you: earth is hard and obstructing. Then he asked them for the definition of space. Once again, they laughed and mocked him and said that space allows for movement, it's unobstructing. Milarepa then walked on space and walked through a mountain. He cut through their concepts that projected an objective reality of fixed characteristics, and he also cut through their arrogance.

Even though I can't do that myself, I have at least intellectual certainty that the mountain is like a mountain in a dream. It could very well have been an event that happened that helped them on their path, and if something like that is going to help me on my path, I'm open to it happening. If not, I'll still just keep practicing in the normal way.

GLENN WALLIS: That sort of story serves a very important genre requirement for the heavily shamanistic culture of Tibet. No one would take a spiritual teacher seriously if such claims weren't made. But do we need anything more than just everyday events to spur our practice on? If someone close to you is diagnosed with cancer, that will change your practice like

nothing else. Seeing someone fly through the air? I don't see how that will affect my practice at all. Everyday events, yes. Seeing suffering, hearing about it, the events that you hear on the news every day. Those affect my practice.

ARI GOLDFIELD: Sure, if somebody did something miraculous, would that end the war in Iraq, or does that end suffering? No, but that doesn't mean a person might not be affected positively by a miraculous encounter. Many people who met great teachers like the Karmapa for the first time say they experienced a miraculous vision. They say he appeared in many ways, and that his body was made of light or appeared in different places in the room. I've heard lots of such stories. I don't think the people telling them are crazy. That was their experience, and for them it was something important.

JUDY LIEF: A good model is to be skeptical but open to anything. We need skepticism, because there are people who try to fool others by creating pseudo-miraculous displays. There are people who have a lot of power who use it to mislead people. Having some kind of extraordinary power is a neutral thing. It could be used to further the teachings, or it could be used to gain power.

GLENN WALLIS: However you look at it, it belongs to a rhetoric of power and coercion. Ari is very optimistic that it can sometimes serve to deepen and enhance practice. But there are too many examples of these kinds of claims doing the opposite and leading to abuse.

BUDDHADHARMA: There's a Tibetan text called the *Hundred Verses of Advice*. It offers hard-nosed advice to ordinary villagers, and it inspires one to practice with diligence. However, the story used to introduce its author, Padampa Sangye, says that he hurled a miraculous stone that was given to him by the Buddha all the way from India into Tibet. Wherever it fell, there he would find disciples to train. He left for Tibet in search of his stone, found it in the village of Tingri, and there he delivered these verses of advice. Do I need the miraculous story, particularly if it gets in the way of my appreciation for the valuable advice in the text itself?

GLENN WALLIS: You're not the model reader. The writers of the text had a different reader in mind, one for whom such a story would be catalyzing.

BUDDHADHARMA: But my lack of faith in the miraculous elements



of the teaching could become an obstacle between me and my teacher, or me and the tradition I've taken on.

GLENN WALLIS: Then you need a new teacher [laughter].

ARI GOLDFIELD: Yes, that wouldn't be fair on the part of the teacher.

GLENN WALLIS: You need to have faith in the fact that you're going to die. That's what the text is ultimately saying. The rest is just the frame.

ARI GOLDFIELD: Your point is very well made about the text being written for certain readers. Perhaps today somebody picks up the *New York Times* and reads a study that says meditation helps with cancer. What physicians previously might consider "miraculous," because they couldn't explain why or how it helps, now is included in the frame because it has been demonstrated to be helpful. We may not care about a stone being thrown around the world, but if we have some type of illness and meditation is thought to be a benefit, that's something people start to get interested in. Maybe that's the miracle of our time.

GLENN WALLIS: That's a very good point. Buddhism has always been sensitive to the needs of the people, refined itself, and tried to address those needs. Teachers today sometimes start off by referring to scientific evidence or brain studies on Buddhism and meditation. The teachings are the teachings, but they're framed differently depending on what will get the listener to pay attention.

JUDY LIEF: They're both serving the same function for different cultures. It sets the scene for why people would view a teaching as valid. Whatever in a particular culture will perk people up is useful. There are so many distractions that we need something to draw attention to the teachings, and it's going to come out very differently in different cultures and times.

GLENN WALLIS: Even if those claims about meditation and brain function turn out not to be true, meditation still does what it does. The frames can be false or not verifiable, but what matters is the teaching itself, what's being framed.

ARI GOLDFIELD: We all agree that teachers who try to use miracles or promises of miraculous powers to manipulate are not really teaching Buddhism in an authentic way. But at the same time, we can see a teaching on meditation preceded by a story of scientifically proven benefits and a teaching like the *Hundred Verses of Advice* preceded by a miraculous story on an equal footing. We're not belittling the ancients for being ignorant. It's just about sentient beings, and their thoughts and their concepts, and how to unpack them. It's about how to lessen our clinging to things as being truly existent, so we can realize the true nature that's beyond concept. It's been done different ways at different times, but it doesn't mean we're better than someone else because we have science and they didn't.

GLENN WALLIS: I agree they're on equal footing, but the equal footing is one of rhetorical device. It's irrelevant to the actual

(Facing page) *Guru Padmasambhava is said to have been born miraculously on a lotus, in the form of an eight-year-old child.*

Padmasambhava (The Lotus Born) (detail)
Artist Unknown

content of the teachings on meditation or on mind that follows. But I don't see miracle as being on equal footing with modern science.

BUDDHADHARMA: We seem to have clear disagreement on the validity of supernatural events. What about descriptions in spiritual texts that could be read mythically, or as allegory, but could also be taken literally? This is obviously a huge issue in Christianity, concerning the Genesis story, for example. In Buddhism, you have Buddha defeating the Maras. Does it make any difference whether we regard the Maras as existing beings or as a potent metaphor for mental events? Couldn't different types of people derive equally beneficial effects coming from different worldviews?

GLENN WALLIS: It does make a difference. If we believe that this is a story about actual entities, it's an ontological claim, and I would say that teaching has no relevance to me. I've never seen nor heard about any such actual beings. But if you leave it at the level of allegory, metaphor, or symbol, I can say that I do indeed understand these forces, these entities in my own life.

BUDDHADHARMA: But can it not be left unspecified, ambiguous, so that one person can see it as external reality and another as psychological?

GLENN WALLIS: In the context of the broader teaching of the Buddha, the psychological interpretation is consistent and makes sense. The other does not.

JUDY LIEF: I would call the nonmaterial language visionary. It comes to people who have vision and receive teachings in visions. They see all sorts of outrageous things, and they don't necessarily describe reality *per se*, but there's some kind of teaching conveyed in the images that thrive in people's visions or waking dreams.

GLENN WALLIS: If you look at the Buddha's meditation teachings, you need to just breathe in, breathe out, let go of the breath, be aware, and you will have a radical shift in your view of reality. The Buddha's injunction to attend to reality might be just because of the endless possibilities that come out of speculating about what's possible and entertaining or being open to the claims of all different people and cultures. Where does that lead us?

The Buddha talked about "the All," which he did in perceptual terms. What for you is the All is what you see, hear, think, smell, feel. Outside of that, there is no all. So, I'm suspicious of terms like transcendent and supernatural. If I see a tree sprite, that's natural; it's in the natural world, it's

The things that appear to us are like appearances in dreams and, therefore, just as in a lucid dream, we can effect changes in the environment. Someone who has certainty in the view and realization through meditative experience can manipulate appearances in the outer world and perform what we would call miracles for the benefit of others. —Ari Goldfield

just not something that I had included in the natural world previously. The supernatural and transcendent are by definition not knowable. Once they're knowable, they're natural and immanent. If we start to speculate endlessly, like a friend of mine who is consumed right now with extraterrestrial life, it just leads us floating through space ungrounded.

JUDY LIEF: Of course, it's a waste of energy to sit around speculating about what might be. Whatever is happening is going to be happening in this moment, this instant of perception. There is a middle way, though, between naive, gullible la-la land and a hard-nosed stance that what I see happening is the only thing that could possibly be happening.

GLENN WALLIS: What I see happening is what I see happening. I wouldn't go as far as to say that it is the only thing that can happen.

JUDY LIEF: Nevertheless, there are two extremes. We're not trying to be stupid, by fostering romantic fascination with extraordinary events. But at the other end, we could close ourselves off to perceiving fully what's happening in this very moment, which may go beyond our experience to date and encompass what we would not have thought possible. We need to be open to whatever arises in our experience and not label it either extraordinary or ordinary.

Beyond that, one of the main practice instructions is to be really careful to distinguish what you have only heard about from what you actually experience. We do have difficulty distinguishing between what we think is happening and what is really happening. We have difficulty pinpointing presupposition as just that, or belief as just that, as opposed to direct immediate experience.

GLENN WALLIS: The Buddha said the seeker of peace should drop the bait of the world. There's a lot of bait offered today as nutrition for the mind, body, and emotions, but it is not

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really nutritious. It's just bait. I think the Buddha would have included as bait all the fantastic ideas that appear in our world that distract us from the moment and how things really are with us.

BUDDHADHARMA: Of course, one man's bait is another man's vision. [Laughter]

ARI GOLDFIELD: We have to have balance—skepticism and openness together—as Judy said earlier. I wouldn't advocate going off into la-la land and making that a path. The analytical and intellectual part of Buddhism, its groundedness, is its fantastic quality, but that doesn't mean we have to limit ourselves to thinking that what materially appears is all that exists. Even scientists tell us today that what our eyes actually perceive, and what we're conscious of, is a minuscule proportion of the data that our eyes are registering. When our mind settles in meditation, when we are able to relax, maybe we see more and more. Maybe we'll see things we didn't expect. Maybe we won't. There is no need to abandon the groundedness of the path to be open to possibility.

GLENN WALLIS: Being open to it means to allow for such a notion to appear. It's still just a thought, and as a meditator you receive it as such and you don't let it become too juicy, don't let it proliferate. The Buddha talked about living within one's proper range, which he called the ancestral abode. So, where should you be living? It's very simple: within your present-moment awareness of what's occurring in your body, your thinking, your feelings, and the phenomenal realm. That's it. Then, the speculative will dry up and dissolve and not proliferate into anything fancy or special.

BUDDHADHARMA: If I read the story of Milarepa walking on air and going through mountains and entertain that possibility and am inspired by it, it is indeed just a thought. What is the problem with that?

GLENN WALLIS: It's just another thought, yes, but it proliferates. The whole point is that we allow our thoughts to get away from us. They disturb *sati*, present-

moment awareness. They go from close to the bone, what's felt and known immediately, to just rampaging through space. And there is a kind of anything-goes quality in a lot of the Buddhism we see today. It's unprincipled, literally not grounded in principles. It gives in to the psychodynamic fantasies and proclivities of Americans, of human beings, who want the fantastic and supernatural and wondrous. We crave it. We desire it deeply. We want there to be angels and heavens and gods who love us. There's nothing more natural than wanting all of that, but the Buddha said, my teachings go in another direction, against the grain of these deep urges and desires.

ARI GOLDFIELD: When you talk about attending to reality, my question is, what's reality?

GLENN WALLIS: Open your eyes, your ears, your nose, your tongue, your body, and your mind. It's right in front of you. You don't need anything extra.

ARI GOLDFIELD: But the Buddha also said in the Mahayana sutras that what appears to your eyes is not valid cognition. What appears to your ears is not valid cognition. What appears to your nose is not valid cognition, and so forth. What you're describing to me sounds more like one of the earlier philosophical schools, like the Vaibhashikas or the Sautrantikas, which posit the outer world as having objective existence.

GLENN WALLIS: No, not at all. I certainly would never accept the idea that there's a mind-independent reality. When you stand next to me, we'll each open our eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind, and we'll each describe a whole different reality. There are lots of good explanations for that—proclivity, genetics, and so forth. An objective reality, one that everyone experiences in common, is absurd.

ARI GOLDFIELD: So, what about tantric meditative practice, which seems to take a broader view of reality?

GLENN WALLIS: I think tantric practice is psychologically very astute, but unnecessarily complex for our day and age. The Buddha's basic meditation accomplishes the same thing in a much simpler fashion. **BD**