

The Allegory of Wonders: Bridging Supernatural Feats and Modern Buddhist Practice

I. Introduction: The Allegory of "Wonders" in the Lotus Sūtra

The foundational narrative of the Lotus Sūtra's Chapter Twenty-Seven, "The Former Deeds of King Wondrous Splendor," presents an initial hermeneutical challenge to the modern practitioner. The central event of the story hinges on two sons, Pure Storehouse and Pure Eye, performing a series of extraordinary, supernatural feats to convert their father, King Wonderful-Adornment, to the Buddhist way. These "wonders," which include walking on water as if it were earth and emitting fire from their bodies, are described as literally transcendent of human capacity. The query before us invites a nuanced exploration of this apparent contradiction: how can a story of literal, miraculous powers serve as a potent allegory for a modern spiritual practice that emphasizes internal transformation, ethical conduct, and social engagement?

This report posits that the "wonders" of Chapter Twenty-Seven are not to be taken at face value as a goal for practice. Instead, they function as a profound allegory for the transformative power of the bodhisattva way. The true "wonders" are not physical marvels, but the deeply personal and social changes that manifest from diligent practice—the capacity to develop unwavering respect for all beings, to control destructive desires, to remain undaunted by life's tragedies, and to inspire the spiritual awakening of others. This analysis will therefore proceed by first detailing the narrative and its immediate context, then examining the historical and philosophical underpinnings of "supernatural powers" in Buddhism, and finally, reinterpreting these ancient marvels as a timeless blueprint for personal and social transformation in the contemporary world. The central question guiding this exploration is: In what ways do the literal "wonders" of Pure Storehouse and Pure Eye allegorically represent the "wonders" of respect, self-control, resilience, and compassion that modern practitioners can develop?

II. The Narrative of Transformation: A Detailed Account of Chapter Twenty-Seven

The Characters and Their Context

The twenty-seventh chapter of the Lotus Sūtra recounts a tale from a past life. In the "Dharma of that Buddha, Cloud Thunder Sound Constellation King Flower Wisdom," there lived a king named Wonderful-Adornment, whose wife was called Pure Virtue. They had two sons, Pure Storehouse and Pure Eye. The narrative immediately establishes a fundamental spiritual schism within this family. The king, Wonderful-Adornment, is a staunch believer in "an externalist way" and is "deeply attached to the dharmas of Brahmanism," a non-Buddhist doctrine.¹ In contrast, his wife, Pure Virtue, and their two sons have already cultivated the path of the bodhisattva, having long practiced the six

pāramitās (perfections), including generosity, morality, forbearance, assiduousness, meditation, and wisdom.¹ The sons, in particular, are described as possessing "mighty spiritual powers, blessings, virtues, and wisdom".¹ They represent not merely potential, but a deeply cultivated state of spiritual attainment.

The pivotal action begins when the sons ask their mother for permission to leave home and follow the Buddha. Their mother, a wise figure in her own right, understands the gravity of their request and the spiritual chasm separating them from their father. She replies, "Your father believes in an externalist way and is deeply attached to the dharmas of Brahmanism. You should ask him if he wants to go along." The sons, expressing their frustration at being born into a household of "deviant views," receive a crucial instruction from their mother: to "manifest spiritual transformations" for their father.¹ This directive underscores that their display of power is not a spontaneous act of self-glorification, but a deliberate and compassionate strategy to break through their father's hardened skepticism. The family dynamic serves as a microcosm of the spiritual quest itself: overcoming obstacles to the Dharma, even when they arise from the most intimate relationships.

The "Wonders" Performed and Their Purpose

In response to their mother's plea, the two sons perform a series of spectacular spiritual transformations, or "wonders," intended to purify their father's mind. The text provides a detailed and awe-inspiring list of their feats: they walked, stood, sat, and reclined in midair; they emitted fire from the lower parts of their bodies while water streamed from the upper, and vice-versa; they manifested in huge bodies that filled up all of space and then became small; and they entered the earth as if it were water and walked on water as if it were earth.¹ These displays were not a mere demonstration of power. The narrative explicitly states their purpose was to "lead their father's mind to purity, belief, and understanding" and to "arouse in him the good roots planted in former lives and to benefit [him]".¹ The wonders, therefore, are a skillful means employed for a specific and compassionate end: the spiritual liberation of another.

The King's Response and The Bodhisattva Path

The effect of these wonders on King Wonderful-Adornment is immediate and profound. Seeing his sons' spiritual powers, the king "rejoiced greatly and gained what he had never experienced before".¹ His mind, having been purified by the experience, is moved to ask the central question that unlocks his new path: "Who is your Master? Whose disciples are you?".¹ The sons direct him to the Buddha Cloud Thunder Sound Constellation King Flower Wisdom, their teacher, and the king immediately expresses his desire to go and meet him. He leaves his throne and joins his sons, approaching the Buddha with a newfound sense of reverence and humility. The king's transformation is complete when the Buddha, in turn, gives him a prophecy of his future enlightenment, affirming that he will become a Buddha named Sala Tree King.¹ The sons are subsequently celebrated by their father as his "Good and Wise Advisors," emphasizing their role not as miracle workers, but as selfless guides on the path to liberation.¹

The narrative arc reveals a foundational principle of the bodhisattva way: compassion is the precondition for transformative action. The text states the sons performed their feats "Out of concern for your father".¹ This establishes that the spiritual powers were not an end in themselves, but an expression of a compassionate intent. The ultimate "wonder" is not the magical feat, but the compassionate motivation that gives it meaning and purpose. This narrative also places the family at the center of the spiritual drama, suggesting that the most intimate relationships are the first and most fertile ground for a practitioner's efforts. The story of the sons and their father provides a timeless model for the bodhisattva path, one that begins with the aspiration to liberate those closest to us before expanding to the entire community. This focus on family provides a vital link between personal practice and its

broader social implications.

III. The Philosophical and Historical Context of *Abhijñā*

Defining Supernatural Powers: *Abhijñā*, *Rddhi*, and *Siddhi*

To properly interpret the "wonders" of Chapter Twenty-Seven, it is necessary to contextualize them within the broader framework of Buddhist philosophy. The spiritual powers described are known by the technical term *abhijñā* (Pali: *abhiññā*), which translates to "extraordinary knowledge and powers".³ This is a comprehensive category that includes both cognitive and physical abilities. A subset of these powers, particularly the physical feats, are known as

rddhi (Pali: *iddhi*), which literally means "success" or "accomplishment" and refers to abilities such as flying through the air or walking on water.³

The first five of the six commonly enumerated *abhijñā* are virtually identical to the *siddhis*, or miraculous powers, found in other Indian ascetic traditions, notably in Patanjali's *Yoga-sūtra*.⁴ These powers include the ability to travel great distances, see and hear everything, know the thoughts of others, and recollect past lives.⁴ It is notable that these same abilities are said to be naturally possessed by non-human entities like goblins and deities, which places them outside the exclusive domain of Buddhist enlightenment.⁴ The sixth and most crucial

abhijñā, however, is unique to the Buddhist path: "freedom by undefiled wisdom".⁴

The Buddha's Ambivalent View

A central tension arises when examining the historical Buddhist perspective on these powers. While their attainment is often viewed as an indication of spiritual progress, the Buddha in the Theravada tradition is said to have cautioned against indulging in them, viewing their use as a "powerful distraction from the path toward enlightenment," which is the sixth *abhijñā* and the ultimate goal.⁴ The potential for ego-driven pursuit or the misuse of such powers is a

well-documented risk. This raises a fundamental question: If these powers are a distraction, why would the Lotus Sūtra, a text of central importance in Mahayana Buddhism, use them as the primary narrative device to awaken the king?

The apparent contradiction can be resolved by recognizing that the wonders, in this context, are not an end in themselves but a profound example of a "skillful means" (*upāya*)—a teaching tool employed to guide beings toward the Dharma. The sons' performance of these powers is not for personal gain or glory; it is a selfless, compassionate act undertaken to address the specific delusion of their father. Their motivation is pure, and their purpose is aligned with the ultimate goal of the bodhisattva path. This reframing demonstrates that the value lies not in the possession of the power, but in the compassionate intention with which it is used. The literal powers become a dramatic metaphor, designed to shock the deluded mind into a state of openness and curiosity, thereby making it receptive to the profound teachings of the Buddha. The literal "wonders" of the sons are therefore not a contradiction of the Buddha's caution, but an illustration of a perfected being's ability to use all means at their disposal for the benefit of others.

The six *abhijñā*, when viewed through this metaphorical lens, can be understood not as supernatural feats but as markers of a progressively deepening spiritual practice. The first five powers can be reinterpreted as a spiritual curriculum. For example, "recollection of past lives" can be a metaphor for understanding the law of cause and effect, recognizing how one's actions have shaped their current reality. Similarly, the ability to "know another's thoughts" could be seen as the cultivation of a deep empathy that allows one to intuitively understand another person's suffering. This perspective transforms a seemingly fantastical list of magical abilities into a practical, psychological, and spiritual guide for personal development. The sixth *abhijñā*, "freedom by undefiled wisdom," remains the ultimate and most profound goal, encompassing all other aspects of the path.

The Six <i>Abhijñā</i>	Literal Power	Modern, Metaphorical Interpretation
1. Divine Eye	The ability to see everything and know future destinies.	Deep insight (<i>prajñā</i>) into the true nature of reality; seeing the interconnectedness and potential of all beings.
2. Divine Ear	The ability to hear everything, including sounds from distant worlds.	The capacity to hear and understand the suffering of others beyond superficial words, cultivating deep empathy.

3. Knowledge of Others' Minds	The ability to know another's thoughts.	Unprecedented compassion and intuitive understanding of others, allowing for the most skillful guidance.
4. Recollection of Past Lives	The ability to remember former existences.	A profound grasp of the principle of causality (<i>karma</i>); understanding how past actions shape the present.
5. Supernatural Powers (<i>rddhi</i>)	The ability to fly, walk on water, change forms, etc.	Unshakable resilience and conviction in one's practice, allowing one to navigate any challenge without being overcome.
6. Freedom by Undefined Wisdom	The ultimate knowledge that brings about an end to suffering.	The attainment of enlightenment (<i>bodhi</i>) and a life state of absolute freedom, wisdom, and compassion.

IV. Redefining "Wonders": The Path of Personal Transformation

The Wonder of Purifying One's Mind

The story of King Wonderful-Adornment offers a powerful blueprint for personal transformation. The true "wonder" is not the magic performed by his sons, but the purification of his own mind. The query highlights that a modern practitioner can "control our desires and not be devastated by life's tragedies." This is a direct parallel to the king's experience. The

king, deeply attached to his pre-existing, non-Buddhist beliefs, represents a mind mired in delusion and fixed ideas. The sons' actions catalyze a process that enables him to overcome this state and conceive a desire for supreme perfect enlightenment.² In the modern context, this process is often referred to as "human revolution," the inner work of overcoming one's "fundamental ignorance" and "self-belittling attitudes".⁵ The capacity to change a life burdened by suffering into one of hope, wisdom, and resilience is the most profound and accessible of all wonders.

The sons' ability to "walk on the water as if it were earth, [and] entered the earth as if it were water"¹ can be viewed as a metaphor for a practitioner's inner state. It does not signify a magical defiance of physics, but a state of mind that is so strong and centered that it can navigate the turbulent "waters" of life's challenges without being swayed or overcome. A person with this life state can confront adversity with the same calm and confidence as if walking on solid ground. This ability to maintain equanimity in the face of tragedy is the ultimate proof of a practitioner's inner transformation.

The Wonder of Respect

Another "wonder" accessible to all is the act of respecting all beings. This is not a passive tolerance but an active engagement that recognizes the inherent dignity and potential—or Buddha nature—in every person.⁵ The bodhisattva path, as extolled in the *Lotus Sūtra*, is fundamentally about working for the liberation of others.⁶ To respect another being is to see their limitless potential and to engage with them from that perspective. The act of sharing the *Dharma*, as the sons do, is rooted in a profound respect for the inherent worth of their father. This act of recognition is, in itself, a radical and transformative act in a world often driven by conflict, ego, and division.

The philosophical foundation for this connection between inner transformation and outer respect is the Mahayana concept of the non-duality of the person and the environment (*Eshō Funi*), which was further developed by the Tiantai patriarch Zhanran.⁷ This principle holds that one's life state and their external environment are inseparable and mutually reflective. A deluded mind sees the world as a place of suffering, while an awakened person sees it as a buddha realm.⁷ The transformation of the individual's mind, therefore, has a direct and immediate impact on their surroundings. The king's mind, once purified by the wonders, is no longer bound by his "Brahmanical doctrines" and a hellish life state, but can perceive the "body of the Thus Come One" as "extremely rare, extraordinary in dignity and adornment".² This shift in perception is the beginning of the king's environment also transforming into a buddha land.

V. The Wonder of Shared Practice: Nichiren's Teaching

The Context of "Sharing a Word or Phrase"

The query references Nichiren's teaching on the power of "sharing even a word or phrase" of the teaching. While some sources may not contain this precise phrasing, a more thorough examination of Nichiren's writings and their commentaries reveals its profound meaning. The phrase is found in a passage that cites the "Teachers of the Law" chapter of the Lotus Sūtra, which states that anyone who "secretly preaches the entire Lotus Sutra or a phrase of it to even one other person, then you should know that this individual, indeed, is an envoy of the Tathagata".⁸ This designates the person who shares the teaching as an emissary "dispatched by the Thus Come One" to carry out his work.⁸

The Power of a Single Act

This seemingly small act of sharing is regarded as a profound wonder because the "word or phrase" contains the entire "great dharma enabling all the people to attain Buddhahood".⁹ It is an act of compassionate propagation, a selflessly motivated effort to help others awaken to their "unlimited potential and power" and establish a strong, unshakable life state.⁵ This act is the modern, accessible equivalent of the sons' wonders. While they dazzled with physical feats, the modern practitioner illuminates with the truth of their transformed life and the power of the teaching. The purpose is the same: to purify the minds of others by inspiring in them a desire to seek the Buddha's teachings.

The wonders of Pure Storehouse and Pure Eye were a display of extraordinary spiritual attainment, likely inaccessible to most. Nichiren's teaching democratizes this process. It moves the concept of "wonders" from the realm of the superhuman to the realm of the profoundly human. A practitioner with compassionate intent can, through the simple act of sharing, wield the same transformative power as the sons of King Wonderful-Adornment.

VI. The Bodhisattva Path: Social Engagement and Collective Liberation

From Individual Happiness to Social Peace

The narrative of King Wonderful-Adornment's family provides a timeless model for the bodhisattva path, one that naturally begins with one's closest relationships. As the story illustrates, the "parents and immediate family members are the first objects of our practice".⁶ If a practitioner's transformation can create a positive ripple effect within the intimate and often challenging environment of the family, it lays the groundwork for broader societal change.

This personal-to-social trajectory is a central theme in Nichiren Buddhism, exemplified by the writing "On Establishing the Correct Teaching for the Peace of the Land." This treatise argues for the inseparability of individual happiness and societal peace.⁵ The king's transformation is not an end but a beginning. It prepares him and his household to contribute to the peace and security of society. The modern practitioner, by engaging in their personal "human revolution" and sharing the teaching, is contributing to the creation of a peaceful society and, in doing so, creating genuine happiness for themselves.⁵

The Modern Bodhisattva and Engaged Buddhism

The modern movement of Engaged Buddhism offers a contemporary expression of the principles found in the story of King Wonderful-Adornment.¹⁰ The contemporary bodhisattva, like Pure Storehouse and Pure Eye, uses their transformed life to address the suffering and delusion of others, but on a societal scale. This involves applying Buddhist principles to systemic and structural problems such as poverty, racism, and environmental degradation.¹⁰

The story's climax is the king's question, "Who is your Master?"¹ The true wonder was not the spectacle itself, but the fact that it inspired a question that led to the king's awakening. This underscores that the goal is not to impress, but to inspire genuine interest in the teaching. The ultimate fulfillment of the "wonders" of Chapter Twenty-Seven is when a practitioner's life is so characterized by compassion, resilience, and happiness that it inspires others to ask, "What is it about you that makes you this way?" This is the moment when personal

transformation becomes a catalyst for the liberation of another.

The Personal 'Wonders' of the Practitioner	The Social 'Wonders' for the Environment
Cultivating an indestructible life state of happiness and resilience.	Contributing to the peace, security, and prosperity of society.
Overcoming "fundamental ignorance" and "self-belittling attitudes."	Inspiring others to awaken to their "unlimited potential and power."
Controlling one's desires and not being devastated by life's tragedies.	Guiding others to overcome their own sufferings through compassionate action.
The ability to see and respect the inherent Buddha nature in all beings.	Fostering a culture of peace, non-violence, and shared dignity.
The transformation of a personal life state through consistent practice.	The realization of a "buddha land" in the immediate environment.

VII. Conclusion: The Enduring Message of King Wonderful-Adornment

The report's analysis consistently demonstrates that the literal wonders of the Lotus Sūtra are a powerful and skillful means to convey a deeper and more profound truth. The story of King Wonderful-Adornment and his sons provides a timeless model for the bodhisattva path. The true "wonders" are not the capacity to levitate or emit fire, but the transformative power of a life changed by Buddhist practice—a life characterized by unshakable resilience, deep compassion, and an unwavering commitment to the happiness of others. The purification of the king's mind is a metaphor for the profound personal revolution that is possible for all people.

This ancient narrative has been reinterpreted through the ages to remain relevant to contemporary practice. In the Nichiren tradition, the "wonder" of sharing a single word or phrase democratizes the transformative power of the teaching, making it accessible to all. In the broader movement of Engaged Buddhism, the mission of the sons is mirrored in the efforts of practitioners to address suffering on a societal level, demonstrating that the

inseparability of individual and environmental transformation is the key to creating a more peaceful world. The tale of King Wonderful-Adornment and his sons provides an enduring model for every practitioner to become a "Good and Wise Advisor" to their family, their community, and all of humanity, using their own personal transformation as a light to "purify the minds of others."

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