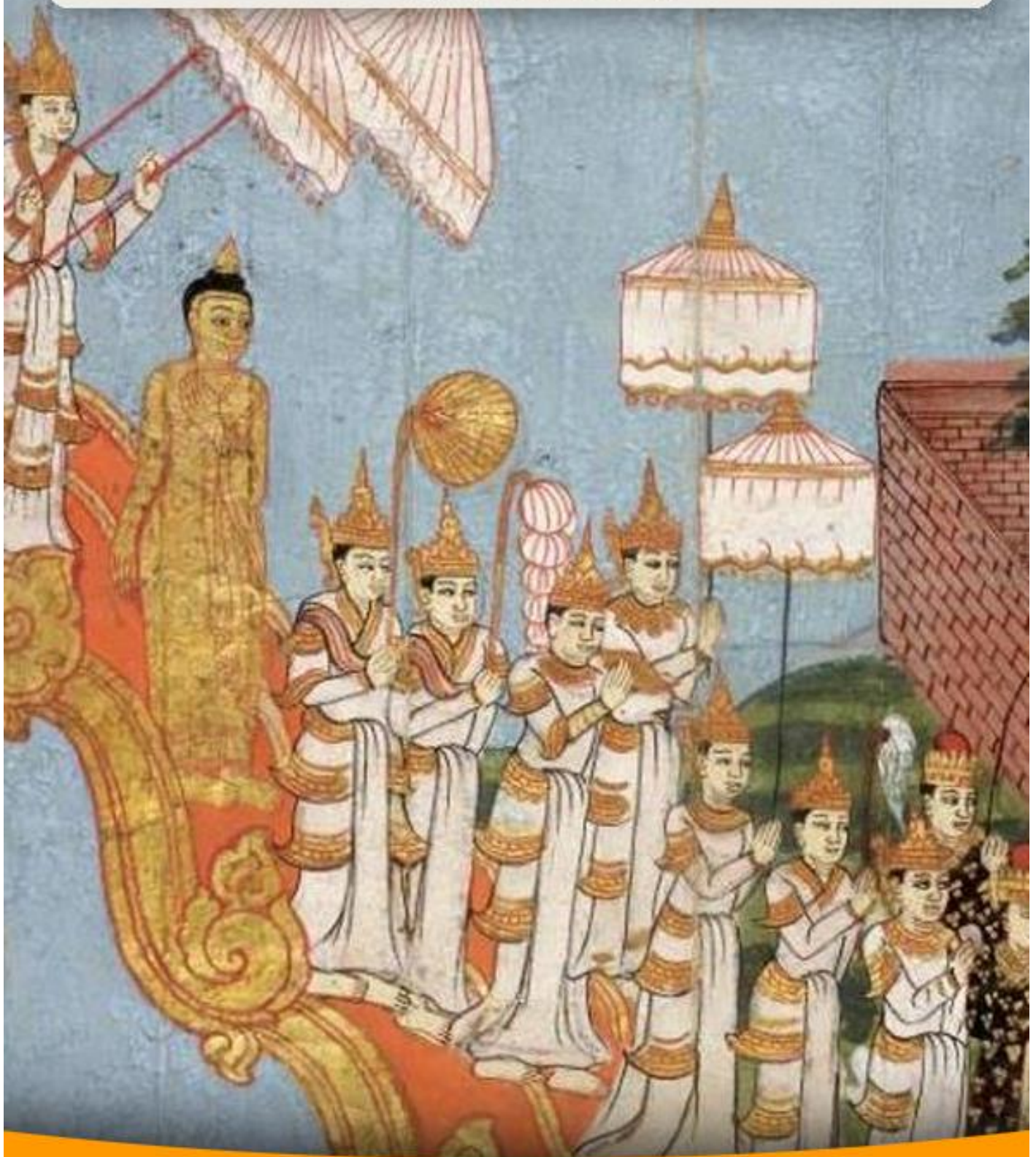


The Miracle of Sankassa

Fact or Fiction



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Essays on Buddhist History & Culture

The Miracle of Sankassa: Fact or Fiction?

The founder of most of the world's major religions are credited with performing marvels and miracles. Jesus walked on the water, Muhammad flew to Jerusalem on the back of a winged horse-like creature, and the Hindu gods performed too many miracles to mention. As spectacular as these and other miracles are, all of them pale into insignificance besides what is sometimes called the Miracle of Sankassa manifested by the Buddha.

What must have been one of ancient Sri Lanka's largest, not to say finest,



The elephant capital of Asoka's
Sankassa pillar

paintings graced the back right-hand wall of the great Tivanka Pilimage in Polonnaruwa and it depicts the Miracle of Sankassa. According to the Pali commentaries this is how this astonishing event unfolded. After preaching the Abhidhamma Pitaka to his mother in the Tavatimsa Heaven the time came for the Buddha to return to earth. Sakka, the king of the gods, created what amounts to three celestial escalators stretching from above the clouds, suggesting that they must have been at least a kilometre long, all the way to the earth, and ending in the town of Sankassa. The central one was made of gems, the left one of silver and the

right one of gold. In all his majesty and glory the Buddha descended to earth on the central escalator-like ladder, Brahma on the left one holding an umbrella over him, and the lesser gods on the right one.

The commentary adds that people from 30 yojana around flocked to witness this spectacle, and you can well believe it. This must have been the most astonishing and spectacular thing that they had ever seen, they must have been dumbstruck with amazement. Since then the Miracle has been celebrated in sculpture, painting and poetry. It has been mentioned and described in countless sermons. In fact, one of the earliest representations of events of the life of the Buddha, a bas relief from the great Bharhut stupa (150/100 BCE) is of this miracle.

However, despite how amazing it was, there are a few decidedly curious facts about the Miracle of Sankassa. Firstly, it is hard to understand why the Buddha decided to descend to earth in the obscure town of Sankassa, and it was a very obscure place. In fact, Sankassa is only mentioned twice in the whole Tipitaka and the Buddha only visited it once, passing through it while on his way to somewhere else. One would think that such an astonishing performance would be worth a large audience such as could be had in a major city such as Savatthi, Rajagaha or Kosambi. Again, it seems odd that the Buddha would set down a Vinaya rule saying that a monk who has developed psychic powers must not display them in public, and then go and break this very rule. When Venerable Pindola demonstrated his powers of levitation in front of a large crowd the Buddha scolded him in the strongest terms. “You are like a prostitute who lifts her dress for the sake of a miserable coin” (Vin.II,110-111).

Perhaps even odder is this. Nearly all suttas in the Tipitaka have a preamble stating where the Buddha preached them. So for example, the well-known Mangala Sutta starts: “Thus have I heard. Once when the Lord was staying at the Jeta’s Grove in Anathapindaka’s Garden...etc.” We are told that the seven books of the Abhidhamma were taught by the Buddha in the Tavatimsa Heaven before his descent to Sankassa and that he later recited them all to Sariputta, just as he told Ananda all his sermons. But strangely, nowhere in the Abhadhamma Pitaka do we read the

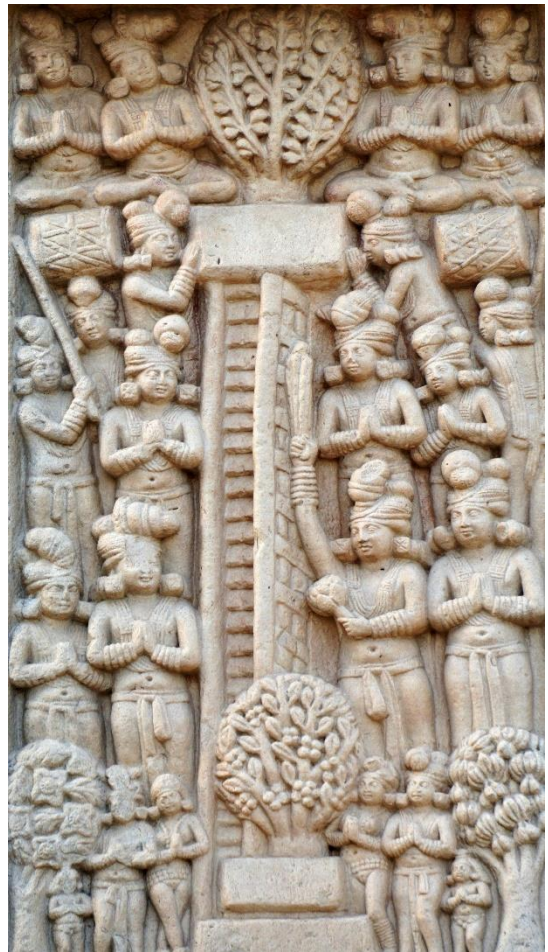
words: “Thus have I heard. Once when the Lord was staying at Sankassa, having descended from the Tavatimsa Heaven... etc.” One would think that given the Abhidhamma’s importance it would have been natural to record where it was taught and the amazing miracle that succeeded it. But, strangest of all is this. Nowhere in the whole of the Tipitaka, some 50 volumes in an English translation, is the Miracle of Sankassa mentioned. Not in the four Nikayas, not in the 15 books of the Khuddhaka Nikaya, not in the Vinaya, and not even in the Abhidhamma Pitaka, the very place one would expect to find some mention of it. Why should this be so?

There are several possible explanations for this strange omission. The first is that Ananda forgot it and consequently did not mention it during the First Council. I think we can safely dismiss this theory. It seems incredible that anyone could forget witnessing such an amazing event. And even if Ananda had forgotten all about it surely at least some of the 500 arahats attending the First Council would have heard about it, perhaps even witnessed it and reminded Ananda of it. Another possible explanation is that there was an account of the Miracle in the Tipitaka but it was accidentally lost due to carelessness. Again this does not appear to be likely. Many suttas are repeated twice, three times or sometimes even more. One would expect something as spectacular as the Miracle to be mentioned several times and in great detail, and, given this, it is unlikely that each and every account could be lost. Thus we arrive at what would seem to be the most compelling explanation – that the Miracle of Sankassa never happened, that it is a later legend, a phantasmagoria that was created in the centuries after the Buddha. Those who find this explanation unacceptable are left with the problem of explaining why a miracle so overwhelming and stupendous failed to get a mention in the sacred scriptures.

However, if this conclusion is correct, if the Miracle of Sankassa is just a Cecil B. DeMille-like legend meant to arouse faith and a sense of wonder in a world and at a time bereft of science, perhaps it is time to stop saying that it ever happened.

This may not be a bad thing. Gently shedding glittering but improbable legends gives more room for the essentials of the Buddha's Dhamma to get a hearing. Trying to convince well-educated young people that three ladders made of precious metals and gems once appeared in the sky reaching from the clouds to the earth and the Buddha and dozens of heavenly beings walked down it to a small, obscure town in northern India, would be a very hard sell. And more so if they had just been told that "Buddhism is scientific".

Further, considering the Miracle of Sankassa to be a legend rather than fact may not weaken Buddhism but actually help strengthen it, particularly concerning the question of the authenticity of the Pali Tipitaka. Of course, traditional Buddhists believe that the suttas are an accurate account of what the Buddha taught, recited at the First Council and passed on without omission or error right up to today. Almost no Indologists or scholars of Buddhism accept this today. The better informed say that the core material in the Nikayas may date from the time of the Buddha to about 100 or perhaps 150 years after his passing, and that even the earlier material reflects the ideas of the Buddha, if not necessarily his exact words. However, some



Depiction of the Sankassa miracle from Sanchi, 2nd century BCE

scholars, mainly those following the American academic Prof. Gregory Schopen of the University of California LA are now saying that the Pali Tipitaka cannot be considered any older than later Sanskrit sutras which began appearing from around

the turn of the first centuries CE. Schopen is a brilliant and prolific Buddhologist and argues his case well. But while scholars of Pali literature consider his position extreme he and others like him are having considerable influence on Buddhist studies in the West.

What has this scholarly debate got to do with the Miracle of Sankassa? Well, quite a lot actually. The story of the Miracle is recounted in numerous Mahayana sutras and early Buddhist Sanskrit literature. It is of course mentioned in the Pali commentaries, including the Jataka commentary, so we know it was accepted in the Theravada tradition. We know that the Miracle was widely considered to be part of the Buddha's biography by at least 150/100 BC because it is represented in sculpture from Sanchi, Bharhut and Mathura. Most interesting of all is that king Asoka erected one of his mighty pillars in Sankassa where its broken remains with its elephant capital can still be seen. There is no inscription on the pillar so it is not known why Asoka chose this place to erect it, but it seems beyond argument that he did so to commemorate the Miracle. We don't know exactly when he erected it either but it must be sometime around 258 BCE when Asoka is thought to have converted to Buddhism. Depending on when the Buddha died, and many scholars now consider about 483 BCE to be an acceptable date, this could mean that the Miracle was already widely known and considered "gospel" perhaps within 250 years of the Buddha's passing. If this is so, then why wasn't it included in the Pali Tipitaka? Why didn't the Theravadins make a place for it in their sacred scriptures?

To me the most compelling answer to this question is this – that the Pali Tipitaka was already closed, it was already considered so sacrosanct that no one would dare add anything new to it. Within approx. 250 years, and quite possibly earlier, the doors were closed on the Miracle of Sankassa and the soon to be numerous other legends that were in the process of evolving. They were admitted into early Buddhist Sanskrit literature, into Mahayana sutras and into the Pali

commentaries, but not into the Tipitaka. So paradoxically in classing the Miracle of Sankassa as a later legend one is at the same time asserting that the Pali Tipitaka must date from before 258 BCE and thus be the oldest record we have of the Buddha and his Dhamma.