

[A Tale of Two Siddhis](#)

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A Tale of Two Siddhis

Miracles and spiritual powers have been covered in past issues of Hinduism Today. We examined the extraordinary manifestations of Satya Sai Baba, related the trance communications of the Brahma Kumaris and discussed the phenomenon of painlessness during intense penance (kavadi). In this issue, we add the saga of an oracle who reads past, present and future, the trials of Transcendental Meditation's "levitation" courses and the Kentucky evangelical who wrongly believed his faith would protect him from rattlesnakes and strychnine.

Such matters seem to fascinate the mind, taking it far from the shores of commonplace concern, renewing faith, strengthening will, confounding comprehension. We have had some personal experience in these remarkable realms, most of it inspiring. From these - and not from any inquiry into the study of miracles (called thaumatology) - we conclude that there are two kinds of miracles: 1. an extraordinary few that are genuine and 2. all the rest. In the rest we heap together - more or less at random - wishful thinking, blind belief, historical manipulation, holier-than-thou gamesmanship, psychic dabbling, inept conjuring, spiritual (and fiscal) ambition, devilish mendacity, harmless exaggeration and just plain cock-and-bull.

Consider some of our less rewarding encounters. Sixteen years ago sixty-five of us were pilgrimaging in South India. After a genuinely soulful visit with the monk known as Sri Shankaracharya of Kanchi (whose doe-like eyes and very being radiated a tangible magic), we were taken to a man in Dindagul who was famed for his siddhis or spiritual powers. Never were there more eager believers, ready to stand in awe of powers that transcend the natural order which so imperiously dominates material existence. We wanted to share in the wonders that are common currency in India, wonders that prove, as little else can, the existence of Something Greater.

As we sat silently in a simple, stone ashram, a white-robed, grey-headed holy man

who looked to be about 60 years old called us forward one-by-one to a chair where he was seated. In hushed tones he uttered a few words about each individual's life and character. By and large, his words were insightful, surprisingly accurate (considering we were strangers from another side of the planet), though not without error. A servant dutifully fetched a large garland of fresh flowers. These the holy man cradled in both hands about waist level. He crushed the flowers together and they were transformed into rock sugar, which began to fall to the wooden floor. It was a divine event and we were witnessing it with our own eyes.

The man called me forward a few minutes later, asking me to cup my hands together. He kneaded the flowers, and sugar fell into my open hands. The simple bliss passing through me was sweeter by far than the candy he urged me to enjoy. But standing there, just a few inches in front of this man, I heard a strange crackling sound coming from the flowers. Glancing closer, I saw that concealed in the flowers was a brown paper bag from which deft hands were freeing a store of sugar candy. I stood more transfixed than ever, stunned by the realization that this was a fraud. And the holy man was a charlatan.

From that day siddhis were subjected to stringent credibility standards and it became clear that there is a lot of hanky-panky among miracle mongers. Not only that, but the unabashed frivolity of certain "miracles" irked. Even if you believe that Sai Baba produces five-cent plastic rings with his photo out of thin air, who cares? Let it be a meal for a hungry devotee, a shawl for an ill-clothed grandmother or, minor phenomena aside, a million acres of harvestable crops in Ethiopian deserts.

Sai Baba's kind of miracles (so different from his lofty teachings) somehow offend the sanctity that should attend wondrous events. He performs under circus tents, before large crowds and with great choreography, much like David Copperfield does on American TV. Except David's wizardry is more enchanting and mystifying. Magic happens on stages before audiences at appointed hours. Miracles happen spontaneously, unexpectedly. People do magic; miracles do people.

Hindus don't hold the patent on such deceptions. We probably don't even rank in the top ten. While travelling in Eastern Sri Lanka two years back, we stumbled upon a Christian Crusade held on a football field. Hundreds of people - mostly Hindus who were handicapped, crippled or seriously ill - had come to be healed. There followed the obligatory stories of healings, the urgent need to accept Christ first and hopeful people throwing down canes and crutches to be anointed with oil.

The evangelist brought a child onto the stage and said the boy had a birth defect and had never taken a step, but would walk tonight by Jesus' power. Holding the boy in two strong hands, the healer shouted as the boy's feet touched the stage: "He's walking. You've seen it. Praise the Lord!" The people remained unmoved, for the healer's hands never released the frightened boy's frail body.

Does all this mean that there are no miracles? Should we admit they are a sham, a non-explanation for things man does not yet comprehend, like giving supernatural agency to eclipses and comets? Certainly not! It just means there are miracles and there are miracles, and let's be certain of the difference.

For one thing, miracles are perceived differently in different religions. Generally speaking, in the Semitic faiths they are seen as the authentication of the religion itself, its godly seal of approval which, when abused, can convey a my-religion-is-more-righteous-than-yours message. More mystically, they are understood as God's special intervention and salvific presence. Islam and Christianity require miracles as a prerequisite for sainthood. In the Roman Catholic Church it is mandatory to believe in the miraculous.

In Hindu, Jain and Buddhist thinking, siddhis are more natural, the expected outcome of a holy or ascetic life and of spiritual realization. They arise out of the Divinity within rather than from the Divine on high. While Biblical prophecy and miracles are the proof upon which Semitic faiths stand, Eastern paths consider them insignificant, almost irrelevant, in relation to higher realization.

One Hindu story illustrates this well. A Guru sent a message that a disciple should come to his riverside ashram for advanced yoga training. Wishing to favorably impress his mentor, the disciple delayed the journey for 12 years while he perfected the siddhi of walking on water. Then one day he appeared on the far bank of the river, called out to the Guru that he was there, and then walked proudly across the water to fall at his Guru's feet.

Unimpressed, the Guru remained silent. The disciple inquired if anything was wrong. "You fool," bellowed the master, "you have wasted 12 years of precious life on a useless trick. I cross the river daily in the fisherman's boat for two cents. Twelve years lost for two cent's worth of magic!"

Though spiritually negligible, miracles do happen. They are wonderful. Our own modern-day gurus have blessed us with a thousand miracles. Even the Vedas were written miraculously. Many we know have encountered the miraculous, whether by revelation, an illness cured, deliverance from danger, a true siddhi seen or a transcendence of ordinary consciousness.

Technically, miracles are reserved for outwardly verifiable events and thus do not include the subjective world of visions or mystical experience. That aside, we suggest that the most worthy miracle of all is the alchemical transformation of the mind from leaden sloth, delusions and desires to the golden light of cosmic energy, love, freedom, charity and self-knowing. What is more wondrous than the soul's journey from darkness to light, from death to immortality? All other miracles pale by comparison. Oh yes, they do serve to give man a compelling glimpse into the Divine Power and Consciousness that dances in the silent heart of existence. A rainbow or a butterfly are wonders, too. To get engrossed in any miracle except that of Being and Spiritual Becoming is to mistake the temporal for the eternal, the road sign for the destination.

Hinduism Today is planning in-depth features on this subject. We welcome any stories, comments or information which our readers may be willing to share - for publication or otherwise.

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