

The Mind-Made Body and Levitation: A Brief Clarification Letter to the Editor

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In a previous issue of the present journal (vol. 55, 227-64), published in 2019, Bryan De Notariis offered a very interesting study of “The Vedic Background of the Buddhist Notions of *iddhi* and *abhiññā*. Three Case Studies with Particular Reference to the Pāli Literature.” The abstract of the article announces, among other things, a discussion of “the speculative idea sustained by some scholars that would see the body made of mind (*manomaya-kāya*) as the base and tool to perform *iddhis* and *abhiññās*.” In the main article, the author then states that

Since in the *Sāmaññaphalasutta* the performance of *iddhis* is preceded by the creation of the body made of mind (*manomaya-kāya*), some scholars argue that the performance of extraordinary capacities is realised through this mental body. However, the *Sāmaññaphalasutta* does not specifically state it, and this assumption seems to be based on the fact that the body made of mind is created before attainment of the ability to perform *iddhis*. (240)

The author then references to my study “Levitation in Early Buddhist Discourse” (published 2016 in the *Journal of the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies*, 10, 11-26) as being one instance of the argument cited above.

This assessment appears to be based on a less than careful reading of my study. On the page referred to by the author (p. 16), I merely



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state that this part of the *Sāmaññaphala-sutta* “gives the impression that the ability to create a mind-made body may have been considered a precondition for feats like levitation”, with a footnote reference to a scholar who made such a suggestion. My statement only reports a suggestion made by someone else and the use of “may” clearly expresses a lack of certainty regarding the conclusiveness of this proposal.

On the same page of my article, I translate a passage from the *Mahāvastu*, which describes the Buddha-to-be in one of his former existences accomplishing the feat of touching the orb of the moon and the orb of the sun with his hand, standard elements in descriptions of the performance of supernormal feats. His physical body, however, remained seated cross-legged in his hermitage (*svayam āśrame paryamkena niṣaṇṇo candramaṇḍalaṃ ca sūryamaṇḍalaṃ ca pāṇinā parāmrṣati*, locations of quotes as in my article). I also referenced a passage from the **Vimuttimaggā*, which investigates whether yogis who lose the absorbed condition of the mind while being up in space and performing supernormal feats will fall to the ground. The reply is that this will not happen, as the yogis will simply return to find themselves on the meditation seat taken earlier (退者還至先坐處). The idea appears to be that the physical body remains seated in meditation during the performance of supernormal feats. This in turn makes it fair to assume that tradition envisaged the mind-made body to enable the performance of such feats.

On the next page of the same article, I take up a description of a visit paid by the Buddha to his disciple Anuruddha. In several versions of this episode, the Buddha’s visit involved a supernormal feat by way of flying over to the distant place where Anuruddha was living. According to a verse found at the end of the relevant *Āṅguttara-nikāya* discourse (AN 8.30), with parallels in the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya* extant in Chinese and Tibetan, Anuruddha explicitly reported that the Buddha approached him through a supernormal feat performed with the help of the mind-made body (*manomayena kāyena iddhiyā, yid las byung ba’i sku yis ... rju [= rdzu] ’phrul gyis*, 意身神通; the sequence of the first two Chinese characters has been emended). This passage provides clear-cut textual evidence for the idea that the mind-made body was considered as offering a way to perform the supernormal feat of levitation.

Pointing this out is only meant to correct the mistaken assertion that previous scholarship has relied merely on speculation for suggesting such a role for the mind-made body. Apart from that, however, the contribution offered by Bryan De Notariis is a very welcome addition to our knowledge of this fascinating aspect of Buddhist thought.