

## The higher knowledges in the Pāli Nikāyas and Vinaya

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He who knows his previous lives,  
Sees heavens and hells,  
And has attained the exhaustion of birth;  
A sage who has mastered the higher knowledges,  
Who knows his mind is purified, freed from all passions;  
Who has eliminated birth and death;  
Wholly given up to the pure life;  
Who has transcended all things;  
Such a one is called Buddha.<sup>1</sup>

This passage from the Pāli Nikāyas, which celebrates one who has achieved Buddhism's highest goal of awakening, is like many other writings in the Buddhist traditions of South Asia and elsewhere, in its inclusion of the *abhiññās* (Sanskrit: *abhiññās*) or "higher knowledges" as one of the integral factors in the process of liberation. The overall acceptance of the idea of attainment of certain extraordinary psychic powers by those adepts who have reached advanced stages of meditation is one of the most ancient and consistent features of South Asian Buddhism, from early Pāli texts to treatises of the latter phases of the Mahāyāna in this region. Despite the large amount of significance given to the achievement of these higher knowledges by Buddhist traditions, and the importance assigned to their use in soteriological processes, scholarship has largely steered clear of the study of the *abhiññās*, perhaps due to a reluctance to

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<sup>1</sup> MN ii 144.

acknowledge their presence in systems frequently characterized as rationalist and non-mystical.

This article is the first in a series of three that will address the role that the *abhiññās* played in various phases of South Asian Buddhist history. Later pieces will address the place of the *abhiññās*, first in the Abhidharma literature and meditation manuals of non-Mahāyāna schools, and second in the *sūtra* and *śāstra* literature of the Mahāyāna. Our focus here will be on the importance of the *abhiññās* in the Pāli Nikāyas and Vinaya, with an eye towards reasons for the abundant discussion of them in these texts. As a result it is hoped that some further light will be shed on certain pedagogical, epistemological and soteriological concerns of the early centuries of South Asian Buddhism, as preserved by the Theravāda tradition. Granting that the central emphasis in Buddhism has never been on meditation as a method for attaining supernormal powers, and also that the self-serving manifestation of them, as well as their direct pursuit, has usually been condemned, the basic premise here is that the *abhiññās* nevertheless have long been an important part of Buddhist systems, and have had a greater religious role than previous scholarship has appreciated.

### I. The *abhiññās* as presented in the Sutta- and Vinaya-Piṭakas of the Pāli canon

In the earliest strata of the Pāli canon, one usually finds five *abhiññās* listed:

- 1) knowledge of the varieties of supernormal power (*iddhi-vidhāñāṇa*).
- 2) divine ear element (*dibbasotadhātu*).
- 3) knowledge comprehending the mind or cognizing others' thoughts (*cetopariyañāṇa/paracittavijānana*).
- 4) knowledge of recollection of past lives (*pubbenivāsānussatiñāṇa*).
- 5) divine eye, or knowledge of passing away and rebirth (*dibba-cakkhu/cutūpapātaiñāṇa*).

From the earliest tradition on, these five higher knowledges have been regarded as mundane (*lokiya*) achievements, attainable by Buddhist and non-Buddhist adepts alike. When possessed by someone who did not follow a Buddhist path, they were seen as inferior because such a person remained tainted with the *āsavas* or “influential defilements,”<sup>2</sup> which Buddhist paths aimed at removing in the pursuit of liberation. Thus, in the Pāli *suttas* one frequently finds a sixth *abhiññā* added, which is “knowledge of the destruction of the influential defilements” (*āsavakkhayañāṇa*). This higher knowledge was said to be accessible only to Buddhists and was considered supermundane (*lokuttara*), since it was essentially the equivalent of the *paññā* (Sanskrit: *prajñā*) or the liberating insight that realized *nibbāna* (Sanskrit: *nirvāṇa*). However, this sixth *abhiññā* was dropped from lists of the post-canonical Theravāda tradition, due in most part, I believe, to an increasing distinction made between results of *vipassanābhāvanā* or “insight meditation” as the only effective means of finally eliminating the *āsavas*, and the fruits of cultivating the *jhāna* states of meditative absorption (cultivated through another meditative process, *samathabhāvanā* or “tranquility meditation”), which are said to produce the *abhiññās*.<sup>3</sup>

In general, the five *abhiññās* besides *iddhi* imply the internal subjective power of intellectual facilities, which are purified and developed by a method of systematic extension from immediate experiences to more distant ones, or from material and gross sensations to ethereal, refined, and even divine ones. In contrast, *iddhi* signifies the controlling power of both the subjective and objective, manifesting itself in control of both mind and matter. Before turning to this *abhiññā* and the perceived spiritual benefits of it and the other higher knowledges, we will first take into consideration, in the interests of presenting an accurate and balanced picture of

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<sup>2</sup> The Pāli texts typically list three *āsavas*, namely: 1) *kāmāsava* – the *āsava* of (craving) sensory pleasure; 2) *bhāvāsava* – the *āsava* of (craving) continued existence; and 3) *avijjāsava* – the *āsava* of ignorance. Sometimes a fourth *āsava* is added, namely *diṭṭhāsava* – the *āsava* of (wrong) views.

<sup>3</sup> To be specific, the texts uniformly agree that it is in the fourth level of *jhāna* that one can develop the five *abhiññās*.

these powers as presented in early Pāli works, ways in which they were considered to be potentially problematic.

### A. *The abhiññās: dangers and limitations*

Most of the scholarship that has dealt with the *abhiññās* has tended to focus on Buddha's apparent ambivalence towards, and denunciation of, such pursuits. Certainly any complete treatment of our topic must consider this aspect, as well as the potential for misuse of the powers and the limitations of their use, as perceived by tradition.

Perhaps the most frequently cited episode involving Buddha and the miraculous is the story of an encounter between Buddha and a fellow *samaṇa* ascetic. Buddha asks the ascetic what he has gained from 25 years of austerities, and the ascetic's proud response is that he could cross over water, like the river that both were standing by, by walking on it. The bemused Buddha replies that this seems like little gain for so much effort, since for the price of one coin, he could cross the river by boat. But this story may well betray the anxiety many scholars feel about wonder-working in Buddhism, for this much cited story cannot be found in any primary Buddhist source; rather, it is an uncited story taken from Conze 1959: 104.

Still, there are also clear signs in primary sources of the Buddha being presented as being wary of dependence upon of excess attention to supernormal powers. In one telling *sutta*, the dim-witted disciple Sunakkhata, who is constantly awestruck by the miraculous displays of charlatans whom he considers *arahants*, threatens to leave the *saṅgha* unless Buddha agrees to teach him the *iddhis*. The Buddha scolds, "So, Sunakkhata, whether miracles are performed or not, the purpose of my teaching the *dhamma* is to lead whoever practices it to total cessation of suffering. Then what purpose would the performance of miracles serve? Consider, you fool, how great this fault of yours is."<sup>4</sup>

There was also danger of mistaking the attainment of *iddhi* for high states of spiritual accomplishment. To regard the *iddhis*

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<sup>4</sup> DN iii 4.

as signs of incipient success had other potential dangers, in that they were available to non-Buddhist *yogins* as well. Even the great villain of the Pāli Nikāyas, Devadatta, possessed these abilities. Worse yet would be to mistake acquisition of the *iddhis* for the final abode of *nibbāna*. It was probably with these dangers in mind that tradition has Buddha making the distinction between “noble” (*ariya*) and “ignoble” (*anariya*) *iddhis*. The supernormal powers available to Buddhist adepts and non-Buddhist *yogins* alike were labled “ignoble,” since they were seen as being concomitant with the *āsavas* and worldly attachment. The only truly “noble” *iddhi* is the “accomplishment” (one meaning of *iddhi*) of abiding mindfully in equanimity (*upekkhā*), indifferent to both that which is unpleasant and that which is pleasant.<sup>5</sup> Instead of furthering one’s involvement in *saṃsāra* as the ignoble *iddhis* can do, the noble *iddhi* of equanimity overcomes the polarities which disturb one’s life in the world. Thus it is said to be without impurities and attachment.

Along very similar lines, Buddha is presented as putting the wondrous in proper perspective in his formula of the three “miracles” (*pāṭihāriya*). The three are the miracles of supernormal powers (*iddhis*), mind-reading (*ādesanā*), and instruction (*anusāsani*). In the *Kevaḍḍha Sutta*, a householder from Nālandā encourages Buddha to perform miracles in order to increase people’s faith. Buddha replies that he does not teach *dhamma* by telling monks to perform miracles, and proceeds to outline the three *pāṭihāriyas*. As for *iddhis*, he says that skeptics will dismiss them as a magical “Gandharan charm,” and concludes, “That is why, O Kevaḍḍha, seeing the danger of [such supernormal powers], I dislike, reject, and despise [them].”<sup>6</sup> As for the power of mind-reading, it is dismissed on similar grounds. Teaching is the best miracle, Buddha says, and he then proceeds to discuss the *dhamma* in terms of the path of training culminating in arahanthood, a path that still, it is worth noting, includes cultivation of the *jhānas*, which therefore entails realizing the supernormal powers and mind-reading, and the rest of the *abhiññās*! Still, the main message here seems to be

<sup>5</sup> DN iii 112.

<sup>6</sup> DN i 213.

that it is only instruction on what to do and what not to do on the path that is truly valuable to the faithful.<sup>7</sup>

Likewise, Buddha was also portrayed as being wary of performing miracles that might confuse the uninitiated about what was truly important in his teaching. In the *Cullavagga* section of the Vinaya, Buddha scolds the disciple Piṇḍola Bhāradvāja, who has been encouraged by the irrepressibly wonder-working Moggallāna to engage in a contest of *iddhi* powers. Clearly opposed to any purposeless exhibition of *iddhi* for its own sake, Buddha calls Bhāradvāja's actions unfitting for a *samaṇa* and likened them to performing a strip-tease for money. It was this very event that led Buddha to declare the precept that forbids monks from displaying supernormal powers.<sup>8</sup> The only other Vinaya rule involving the *abhiññās* concerns falsely claiming possession of supernormal powers. This is a *pārājika* (one who has committed a grave transgression against the monastic rules) offense, warranting expulsion from the *saṅgha*.<sup>9</sup>

Finally, it must be pointed out that a thorough reading of the Pāli Nikāyas reveals that the *abhiññās* were not always deemed a necessary part of the path to *nibbāna*. The sources indicate that actually a relatively small percentage of disciples were advanced enough in cultivation of the *jhānas* to have attained them. Most *arahants* seem to have been liberated by insight meditation alone. In one passage, Buddha says that out of 500 monks, 60 have what are called the three *vijjās*, which are synonymous with the final three *abhiññās*; 60 have followed the path that has resulted in them becoming what is called “liberated in both ways” (*ubhatobhāgavimutta*);<sup>10</sup> and the

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<sup>7</sup> For a full treatment of the *pāṭihāriyas* (Sanskrit: *prātihāryas*), see David Fiordalis' article in this volume.

<sup>8</sup> Vin ii 112.

<sup>9</sup> Vin iii 91.

<sup>10</sup> Both in the Pāli Nikāyas and among modern academics, there is no universal agreement on what it means to be “liberated in both ways.” Scholars have tended to assert that it means a person described in many Nikāyan passages as “liberated by insight” and “liberated in mind,” but the evidence does not bear this out. A definition found only once in the Nikāyas says that when a monk is able to attain the “eight liberations” (meaning the *jhānas* of the form and formless realms [Paṭiṣ ii 38–40]) in forward and reverse order, he

rest are said to have attained what is called “liberation by insight” (*paññāvimutti*) alone, which is the result of a path that does not involve cultivation of the higher *jhānas* and the *abhiññās*.<sup>11</sup>

*B. Iddhividhānāna*

How light is my body,  
Touched by abundant joy and bliss!  
Just as a tuft of cotton floats on the breeze,  
In the same way my body seems to float.<sup>12</sup>

The word *iddhi* is derived from a verb root meaning “to prosper or succeed” (Pāli: *iṣ*; Sanskrit: *ardh/ṛdh*). So while the “common” meaning of *iddhi* is “success”/“achievement”/“prosperity,” in the context of South Asian meditative traditions, it usually denotes supernatural or wonder-working power, implying both psychic and physical powers which lead to accomplishment or success. When discussing these so-called “supernormal powers,” it is important to bear in mind that these abilities should not be considered miraculous in the sense of being contrary to the Buddhist understanding of mental processes. *Iddhi* powers are not the results of some suspension of the processes of mind or nature, but are rather the by-products of the *mastery* of these processes. In this sense *iddhi* could be translated simply as “success,” meaning that attainment of it is indicative of progress along the path, particularly meditative attainment. These supernatural powers are therefore more important for what they signify, which is the attainment of a certain important level of soteriological success in practice (namely realization of the fourth *jhāna* of meditative absorption, the state which enables one to cultivate these powers), than they are as powers in and of themselves. That the *iddhi* powers are considered non-mi-

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is considered “liberated in both ways” (DN ii 70–71). But the most frequently occurring and only other definition says that such a person is one who has attained all nine meditative absorptions of the form and formless realms, and then goes on to see their impermanence by means of insight (AN iv 453; MN i 477–481; *et freq.*).

<sup>11</sup> SN i 191.

<sup>12</sup> Th i 104.

raculous by-products indicating progress in meditation is seen in the gloss of the great Theravāda commentator Buddhaghosa, which renders *iddhi* as “effectiveness of means” and “success in the sense of attainment.”<sup>13</sup>

The Pāli term *iddhividhā* literally means “kinds of success.” To see what kinds of success were held to be available to the meditation adepts of early Buddhism, attention must be given to the *locus classicus* for the presentation of the *abhiññās*, the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta*, where the *iddhis* are presented as both the immediate results of systematic meditation, and as the hidden powers of the human mind. According to this *sutta*, after the five hindrances (*nīvaraṇas*),<sup>14</sup> – which are considered conducive to unreflective involvement in the realm of desire – have been eliminated, absorption (*appanā*) in the four *jhāna* meditative states is possible. It is upon attaining the fourth *jhāna* that one is able to cultivate the supernormal powers and the other *abhiññās*. What follows is the oft-repeated stock description of how the *abhiññās* are acquired, as it is given in this *sutta*:

When the mind is thus concentrated, pure, cleansed, free from stains, free from corruptions, supple, pliant, steady, and unperturbed, one directs and thoroughly turns the mind to knowledge and vision.<sup>15</sup>

It is noteworthy that the *abhiññās* occur in the fourth *jhāna* level of the form realm, where not only has the normal perception (*saññā*) of the desire realm been left behind, but also where the four mental factors of the previous *jhānas*, which are initial thought (*vitakka*), sustained thought (*vicāra*), mental joy (*pīti*) and bodily bliss (*sukha*) have also been eliminated. Only in the fourth *jhāna*, characterized by equanimity (*upekkhā*) and purity of mindfulness (*sati-parisuddhi*), is the mind concentrated, purified, and flexible enough to possess a higher and more direct knowledge of the true nature of things. Indeed, what is implied here will be explicitly stated by

<sup>13</sup> Vism 12.21.

<sup>14</sup> They are: 1) sensual desire (*kāmacchanda*); 2) ill-will (*byāpāda/vyāpāda*); 3) sloth and torpor (*thīnamiddha*); 4) mental agitation and worry (*uddhaccakukkucca*); and 5) doubt (*vicikicchā*).

<sup>15</sup> DN i 76.



later tradition: It is these very eight factors of mind just mentioned in the passage given above – factors such as concentration, purity, pliancy, etc. – that are the proximate cause for realization of the *abhiññās*.<sup>16</sup>

Next, after having observed that one’s mind is dependent on one’s impermanent, disintegrating body, one directs one’s mind to the creation of what is called a “mind-made body” (*manomaya-kāya*). One creates from this mind-made body “another body” (*aññakāya*), which “has form and is complete in all its limbs and faculties.”<sup>17</sup> This process is likened to a person pulling a reed from a sheath, a sword from its scabbard, or a snake from its skin.<sup>18</sup> It is this “other body,” created by the mind in the fourth *jhāna*, as opposed to the body subject to its usual frailties, that one employs to acquire *iddhi* and the other *abhiññās*. A major issue that has been raised here is the scholarly argument that says that since the *abhiññās* involve this mind-made body and not one’s “normal” body, they can be interpreted as mere ideations or mental projections of sorts. In this attempt to explain away this *abhiññā*, we see here another example of scholars’ anxiety, in this case about the supernormal powers as truly realizable. While this argument may be valid to a degree, it is important to remember that according to Buddhism, the mind is the sixth sense, and as such it is not different from the other senses. Therefore these “ideations” are no less “real” than other types of sensory experience.<sup>19</sup>

Having created the body made of mind, one then directs attention to *iddhividhā*, the various kinds of supernormal power. The version given in the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* is stereotyped, found without variation in eighteen other places in the canon, as well as many times in the later commentaries and meditation manuals of the Theravāda tradition, and also in Mahāyāna literature. The passage goes as follows:

<sup>16</sup> Vism 12.9.

<sup>17</sup> Paṭis ii 210–211.

<sup>18</sup> Paṭis ii 211; Vism 12.139.

<sup>19</sup> Johansson 1969: 48.

Being one he becomes many; being many he becomes one again. He appears and vanishes. He goes unhindered through walls, enclosures, and mountains, as if through air. He dives in and out of the earth, as though in water. He walks on water as though on broken ground. Seated cross-legged, he flies in the sky like a winged bird. With his hand he touches and strokes the moon and sun, so mighty and powerful. He travels as far as the Brahma world.<sup>20</sup>

Unfortunately, the Pāli canon does not provide much more information regarding the techniques by which one would obtain each of these eight extraordinary abilities. However, later meditation manuals, particularly the *Visuddhimagga*, do.

### C. *Dibbasotadhātu*

As is presented in the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta*, the meditator, in the same concentrated and purely mindful state of the fourth *jhāna* as was described above, directs his attention to the cultivation of the “divine ear element.” The rather brief stereotyped passage, which is also found frequently in the Pāli canon, provided the model upon which later texts expanded, is as follows:

...he directs and turns the mind to the divine ear element. With the divine ear element, which is purified and surpasses the human, he hears both kinds of sounds, the divine and the human, those that are far as well as near.<sup>21</sup>

This power is likened to the ability to distinguish between the various kinds of drums heard at the same time. It is a tremendous expansion of auditory perception in both extent and depth, without the medium of the actual sense organ. The formula implies not only the ability to perceive sounds from realms extremely far away, but also the ability to *understand* non-human beings in other realms. Unfortunately, the *suttas* and *Vinaya* provide very little information about the potential uses of this power or the techniques applied for attaining it. Divine ear appears to be the least important of the *abhiññās*. Unlike the other *abhiññās*, its role and usage in Buddhist

<sup>20</sup> DN i 78.

<sup>21</sup> DN i 79.

epistemological and soteriological schemes is unclear. Except from the point that the ability to hear sounds from other realms might confirm the Buddhist cosmological teaching of the existence of beings in these realms (the Buddhist worldview of the five or six destinies), it does not really serve to verify key Buddhist teachings, the way the other *abhiññās* do, as we will see. Most importantly, it seems to lack the revelatory nature of the other *abhiññās*, in that it adds little additional information to one's understanding of the way things truly are. Furthermore, there is not much pedagogical use for the divine ear. This too separates it from the other remaining higher knowledges, which can be used to help others enter into or progress along the path. However, it is certainly conceivable that the power could be used to impress others, and thus be a possible skillful use of means (*upāya*) that might convert others. However, here we need to bear in mind the Buddha's usual discouragement of using supernormal powers to convert, as displays of them could mislead others about what is truly important in the *dhamma*.

#### *D. Cetopariyañāṇa/paracittavijānana*

As presented in the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta*, the meditator, still equi-poised in the fourth *jhāna*, is next able to read others' minds in the following manner:

He knows and distinguishes with this mind the minds of other beings or other persons. He knows the mind of passion to be with passion; he knows the mind without passion to be without passion. He knows the mind of hate to be with hate; he knows the mind without hate to be without hate. He knows the deluded mind to be deluded; he knows the undeluded mind to be undeluded. He knows the distracted mind to be distracted; he knows the attentive mind to be attentive. He knows the unexpanded mind to be unexpanded; he knows the expanded mind to be expanded. He knows the surpassed mind to be surpassed; he knows the unsurpassed mind to be unsurpassed. He knows the concentrated mind to be concentrated; he knows the unconcentrated mind to be unconcentrated. He knows the liberated mind to be liberated; he knows the unliberated mind to be unliberated.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> DN i 79–80.

The text goes on to say that one who possesses this *abhiññā* knows the workings of another's mind with the same familiarity as one who can observe one's face in a mirror or pan of water and notice whether there is a mote on it or not.<sup>23</sup>

The Pāli canon speaks of several different degrees of telepathic mind-reading. The early stereotyped formula given above seems to imply that an adept could come to know only the general character of another's mind. But in the same stratum of thought, a much more detailed knowledge is suggested: "One can know the mind (*citta*), the states of mind (*cetasika*), the initial thoughts (*vitakka*), and the trains of thoughts (*vicārita*) of other beings and persons."<sup>24</sup> In another passage, the Buddha claims to know by this *abhiññā* the "specific thoughts" (*parivitatka*) in the mind of a *brāhmaṇa* student. In the *Āṅguttara-Nikāya*, there are said to be four ways of knowing another's mind. They are: 1) observing external signs; 2) obtaining information from others; 3) listening to the vibrations of thought of another as he thinks; and 4) comprehending the mind of another and observing how the mental dispositions are ordered so as to be able to predict which subsequent thoughts might arise.<sup>25</sup>

The great attention given to the different types of knowledge of others' minds in the *suttas* suggests that this *abhiññā* was considered extremely important by early tradition. Indeed, one can see its usefulness in a variety of applications. As the references to knowing "trains of thoughts" and the order of thoughts indicates, there seems to be a conviction that through this *abhiññā* one can gain a more certain knowledge of mental phenomena. The *Āṅguttara-Nikāya* passage just quoted even says that Buddha and his disciples were able to discern how certain thoughts followed other thoughts. This clearly suggests that one could gain a *vipassanā*-like awareness of the mental continuity and the ever-changing nature of thought processes. This also could be seen as a precursor to Abhidhamma and its explanations of how the mind works, of how certain thoughts follow other specific thoughts. This insight into the transient nature

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<sup>23</sup> DN i 80.

<sup>24</sup> DN i 213.

<sup>25</sup> AN v 170–171.

of thoughts that make up the mind is a key, liberating realization along the Buddhist path, and it is intriguing that this type of awareness of momentariness or impermanence, phenomenologically quite similar to the third foundation of mindfulness, could be gained while meditating in the fourth *jhāna*. This affirms the description of the fourth *jhāna* as being a state of mindfulness, and at the same time seems to counter the not infrequent Buddhist claim that such insight only comes from *vipassanā* practice.

Not only did this *abhiññā* provide valuable insight into the workings of the mind – and thus quite likely contributed to Buddhist theories of mental connections eventually articulated in full in the Abhidhamma, as well as verify the Buddhist understanding of mind as a continuity or succession (*santati/santāna*) of momentary thoughts – but it also could serve as a verificatory tool for affirming attainment of certain states of spiritual advancement. When a disciple attained arahantness (*arahattā*), it was common for him or her to “declare gnosis” (*aññām vyākaroti*) by announcing, “Destroyed is rebirth, lived is the holy life, done what is to be done. I am assured that there is no more life in these conditions.”<sup>26</sup> The Buddha set forth six ways to scrutinize this claim, which involved such methods as simply asking the person what he or she had realized. But because a person could conceivably lie or be mistaken in response to such an inquiry, it was said that the *only certain* means for determining another’s attainment was for a Buddha or disciple to read the other’s mind with his or her own mind (*cetasā ceto paricca parivittakam aññāya*).<sup>27</sup>

Knowledge of others’ minds could also be combined with divine eye to gain insight into the workings of *saṃsāra*. One first applied divine eye in order to see other beings in other destinies faring according to their *kamma*, and then would employ knowledge of their thoughts. In this way one could come to know what beings in hell, animal, and hungry ghost realms suffer. This could provide powerful incentive to take up or practice harder the path to liberation, just as could the knowledge of the minds of those abiding in human and

<sup>26</sup> DN i 84; MN i 184, 255–256, 348, 496, 522, ii 239, iii 36, 287; *et freq.*

<sup>27</sup> AN v 161–164.

divine realms who had attained an almost nirvanic state of calm, equanimity, joy, and insight. Knowledge that those whose *kammas* have given them less advanced but still very good human or even divine destinies could likewise provide powerful incentive to live a morally good life.

A section from the Nikāyas on mind-reading that seems to have been entirely overlooked by scholars discussing the *abhiññā* of mind-reading is from the *Mahāsīhanāda Sutta* of the MN. It is remarkable in that like what has been discussed in the last two paragraphs, the Buddha speaks of using this *abhiññā* both in a way that could confirm that *nibbāna* is a truly existent reality and provide insight into the workings of *kamma* and the different kinds of actions that lead to rebirth in either good or bad destinies. But in addition to this, the Buddha is said to have gained the ability to become aware of the minds of even those who had attained *nibbāna*! In this discourse, the Buddha describes in some length how he, by “understanding” (or, perhaps better, “encompassing”) mind with mind (*cetasā ceto paricca*), can see beings passing into the five destinies<sup>28</sup> and the kinds of action that lead to rebirth in each. Here again a way into seeing not only that the law of *kamma* is actually in effect, but also a way of coming to know in a very practical way what kinds of behaviors typically lead to either bad or good destinies, is provided by this soteriologically important *abhiññā*. But of at least equal importance in this section on the results of “encompassing mind with mind” is the Buddha asserting that this supernormal ability can affirm a person’s attainment of *nibbāna* (to be precise, the Buddha sees that any being who “here and now enters upon and abides in the liberation of mind and liberation by wisdom that are without the influential impurities because of the destruction of influential impurities”).<sup>29</sup> So, once again we find this *abhiññā* leading to key realizations that certain very central Buddhist beliefs – in this case including the conviction that *nibbāna* truly ex-

<sup>28</sup> It seems that in the earlier strata of discourses in the Nikāyas, the destiny of life as a demon (*asura*) is not yet included as one of the possible destinies of living beings. Later texts add the *asura* destiny to make up the better known list of six destinies.

<sup>29</sup> MN i 76. The whole section just discussed is MN i 74–76.

ists (making this *abhiññā* a direct, experiential confirmation of the third noble truth) – are actual, true realities. Receiving affirming knowledge that *nibbāna* is indeed attainable also could function very well to motivate one to greater effort in practice, knowing that such a state certainly exists.

Finally, this *abhiññā* could also be used as a teaching tool to benefit others. The tradition holds that Buddha and his chief disciples used it to preach the *dhamma* with the most success, because they knew the mental states of the individuals they were instructing. So this *abhiññā* could be a powerful form of skillful means (*upāya*). And, as any student of Buddhism knows, tradition attributes to Buddha the constant concern with students' mental disposition, so that he could respond in the most soteriologically useful way.<sup>30</sup> In this respect, this *abhiññā* is quite likely to have been a highly valued skill for teachers of Buddhist traditions.

### E. The three *vijjās*

The next three *abhiññās* – divine eye, recollection of past lives, and knowledge of the exhaustion of the impure influences – are collectively known as the “three knowledges.” Before I treat each individually, I will discuss them as a group. These three *abhiññās* are most important for the tradition, as they stand at the very core of descriptions of Buddha's experience of liberating awakening.

The three *vijjās* can be distinguished from the other *abhiññās* in that they are considered “clear visions” (*parisuddhañānadassana*) experienced by Buddha under the bodhi tree. As represented in the *Verañja Sutta* of the Aṅguttara-Nikāya and the *Bhayabherava* and *Mahāsaccaka Suttas* of the Majjhima-Nikāya, Buddha received these clear visions on his night of awakening by attaining the four *jhānas*, but not proceeding to the meditations of the “formless realm.” In the first watch of the night, he directed his mind to the knowledge of many thousands of his own previous births, in each case recalling his name, class, food ingested, experiences of pleasure and suffering, and death. By this knowledge it is said that

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<sup>30</sup> See, for example, Dhpa iii 215.

“ignorance was overcome, clear vision arose, darkness was overcome, light arose,”<sup>31</sup> and that he became “diligent, ardent, and self-controlled.”<sup>32</sup> In the second watch, by means of the pure divine eye, Buddha saw beings reaching destinies according to their deeds. Again, “ignorance was overcome, clear vision arose,” etc. In the third watch, he directed his mind to the exhaustion of influential defilements (*āsavas*) and to the realization of the four noble truths.

The recognition that these higher knowledges were factors that essentially and directly led to Buddha’s liberating awakening is crucial to an appreciation of the role of the *abhiññās* in Buddhist tradition. It is quite noteworthy that, as set forth in these particular traditional accounts, it is these three knowledges in particular, not insight into selflessness, dependent origination, the four noble truths<sup>33</sup> or any of the other insights considered central to Buddhism, which function to eliminate ignorance and consequently liberate Buddha.

That these three knowledges have been seen as absolutely essential to the path to liberation is brought out in several passages found elsewhere in the the Pāli Nikāyas. Perhaps the most telling example of the value attributed to these knowledges is the *Tevijja-Vacchagotta Sutta*, in which Buddha is asked if it is correct to say that he is omniscient (*sabbaññā*). Buddha replies that it is not correct, but that it would be correct to describe him as “one who possesses the three knowledges.”<sup>34</sup> He goes on to say that he recollects former lives in all modes and details, comprehends that beings are inferior, superior, beautiful, ugly, well-faring and ill-faring accord-

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<sup>31</sup> MN i 22; 248–249.

<sup>32</sup> MN i 22; 248.

<sup>33</sup> The versions of the enlightenment found at SN 22:26 and 12:65 focus respectively on insight into selflessness and dependent origination as the central realizations of the Buddha’s experience of awakening. DN ii 30–35 presents the former Buddha Vipassī as attaining enlightenment by virtue of contemplating both dependent origination and the selfless nature of the aggregates. The famous first sermon of the Buddha, on “Setting in motion the wheel of the dhamma” (*Dhammacakkappavattanasutta*) presents Buddha basing his enlightenment on insight into the four noble truths.

<sup>34</sup> MN i 482.



ing to their actions, and abides in the liberation of mind and the liberation by insight realized by the higher knowledge of the destruction of the *āsavas*.<sup>35</sup>

Thus, the significance given to the three knowledges (at DN ii 275 they are said to be the “things to be realized,” and at AN ii 65 they are said to be the characteristics of a noble monk [*ariya-bhikkhu*]) expands the role and importance of the *abhiññās* even further. Not only are they of illuminating, verificatory (confirming as they do the Buddhist understanding of the workings of *kamma* and *samsāra*), and pedagogical value, but they also describe the types and limits of knowledge which Buddha and the *arahants* possessed after liberation. At other points in the canon, Buddha’s scope of knowledge appears to be far broader than these *abhiññās*, but this threefold knowledge formula is clearly represented as being of more soteriological significance to him than omniscience. In the *suttas*, Buddha often directs his discourse to the three *vijjās* as a topic of great spiritual value. In fact, many passages equate the attainment of arahanthood itself with the realization of the three *vijjās*. For example, the *Mahāssapuru Sutta* says that a *bhikkhu* who acquires the three *vijjās* in the fourth *jhāna* is called “a *samaṇa*, a *brāhmaṇa*, one who is cleansed, an attainer of knowledge, well-versed in sacred learning, a noble person, and an *arahant*.”<sup>36</sup>

#### F. *Pubbenivāsānussatiñāṇa*

The stereotyped formula, found in the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* and elsewhere,<sup>37</sup> is as follows:

I remembered many previous existences: one, two, three, four, five births, ten, twenty, thirty, forty, fifty births, a hundred, a thousand, a hundred-thousand births, many eons of destruction, many eons of creation, and many eons of world destruction and creation. In such a place such was my name, such my clan, such my appearance (or “class:” *vaṇṇa*), such my food, such experiences of pleasure and pain,

<sup>35</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> MN i 278.

<sup>37</sup> Such as MN i 22 and i 248.

and such limits of my life. When I passed away from there, I arose elsewhere, and there such was my name, such was my clan.... and when I passed away from there, I arose elsewhere. Thus I remembered many previous existences, with their conditions and particulars.

There are some curiosities and contradictions that occasionally arise with respect to this *abhiññā*. Some passages even speak of the ability to “remember” (*anussarati*) future lives!<sup>38</sup> And there was a minor controversy – that would reach near inconceivable proportions in Abhidharma discussions – over the length of different beings’ memories, that had its seeds in the earlier *suttas*. At one point, Buddha says that he can recall *only* as far back as 91 *kalpas*.<sup>39</sup> At other points, he claims to remember an “immeasurable” amount of *kalpas*.<sup>40</sup>

Besides the tales in the *Jātaka*, which always end with the Buddha exercising this *abhiññā* to recall that he was that very living being discussed in the story, there are numerous instances in the *suttas* where the Buddha recalls his former lives, although unlike the distinctive pattern found in the *Jātaka*, they do not always carry the emphasis on improved spiritual development over many lifetimes.

From a Buddhist perspective, clearly the most useful knowledge to be gained from memory of past lives is confirmation of the teachings of cyclic existence and rebirth. As already stated, such memories could provide powerful incentive to be free from *saṃsāra*.

There is, however, an interesting *sutta* which shows that a Buddhist interpretation was not the only possible conclusion taken from this *abhiññā*. In the *Brahmajāla Sutta*, Buddha admits that certain other *samaṇas* and *brāhmaṇas*, by means of their attainment of certain states of *samādhi*, are able to call to mind several hundred-thousand past lives. This experience, however, only

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<sup>38</sup> Demiéville 1927: 291. Bodhi (2000) says that the *Sāratthappakāsinī* (SN-a), in commenting on SN v 176, speaks of the elder who remembers both a thousand eons of past life and a thousand eons of future lives.

<sup>39</sup> MN i 483.

<sup>40</sup> Jā i 25, 83; Pv iv 17; Dhp-a i 88.

serves to confirm their reifying, eternalist views. This memory of theirs confirms their beliefs that the self and the world are eternal, like a mountain peak which gives birth to nothing new, set firmly like a post. These beings rush around, circulate, pass away, and are born, but their self remains eternally.<sup>41</sup> Thus it appears that even one of the three *vijjās* can possibly further misunderstanding from a Buddhist point of view.

### G. *Dibbacakkhu/cutūpapātāñāṇa*

The following stereotyped formula as it appears in the *Sāmañña-phala Sutta* is as follows:

He directs and turns his mind to the knowledge of the passing away and rebirth of beings. With the divine eye, which is purified and surpasses the human, he sees beings passing away and being reborn: inferior and superior, fair and ugly, happy and unhappy in their destinies, as *kamma* directs them. He understands, ‘these beings, on account of of bad conduct in body, speech, and mind, reviling noble ones, have wrong view, and will suffer the fruits of *kamma* due to their wrong view. Upon the break-up of their bodies after death, they are reborn in a lower world, in a bad destiny, a state of suffering, hell. But those beings, on account of good conduct of body, speech and mind and not reviling noble ones, have right view, and will receive the fruits of *kamma* due to their right view. Upon the break-up of their bodies after death, they are reborn in a good destiny, a divine world.’<sup>42</sup>

This knowledge is likened to a person standing on a terrace looking over a crossroads, viewing others as they pass in and out of doorways.<sup>43</sup> Divine eye, as presented in the *suttas*, seems to have two distinct aspects to it. The first is the ability to see contemporaneous events beyond the range of normal vision. For example, Anuruddha, considered foremost among Buddha’s disciples in mastery of divine eye, is said to have the power “to see a thousand worlds.”<sup>44</sup>

<sup>41</sup> DN i 13.

<sup>42</sup> DN i 82.

<sup>43</sup> DN i 83.

<sup>44</sup> MN i 213 says “he sees a thousand worlds” (*sahassaṃ lokānam vo-*

Second, divine eye is also directed towards gaining a knowledge of the passing away and rebirth of beings, which would give one not only an understanding of the workings of *kamma*, but also the liberating insight into the fluctuating nature of things, as one witnesses the ever-changing conditions of the lives of those faring according to their *kammas*. So, once again, the tremendous soteriological import of an *abhiññā* can be seen. In the *Mahāsīhānāda Sutta*, Buddha declares that one with divine eye comprehends each of the five destinies,<sup>45</sup> the course of action leading to each destiny, and how that being fares according to *kamma*, so that upon death the next fitting destiny is reached.<sup>46</sup> This obviously also has ramifications for Buddhist ethics, as again such knowledge would provide one with an increased understanding of what kinds of deeds lead to better rebirths and what kinds of deeds lead to worse ones. In a later Pāli text, the chief disciple Moggallāna wants to use this *abhiññā* to “lift the veil” of an unknown *deva*-world, so that he might benefit and encourage beings by reporting back that beings are faring very well there, due to their previous good deeds on earth.<sup>47</sup>

One could well see this *abhiññā*, with the insights it brings into *kamma* and that which leads to rebirth in higher and lower destinies, as well as into the ephemeral nature of samsaric conditions, as a central basis from which Buddha designed his course of practice for the spiritual advancement of sentient beings.

### *H. Āsavakkhayañāṇa*

Finally, at the end of the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta*, the meditator, still concentrated in the fourth *jhāna*, directs and turns his mind to the destruction of the *āsavas* or influential impurities. The passage,

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*loketi*), and SN v 176 and v 299 say “I directly know a thousand worlds” (*sahassam lokam abhijānāmi*).

<sup>45</sup> This discourse is interesting, in that it first describes how divine eye leads to insight in the five destinies, but also, as we saw above, describes how mind-reading leads to the same insight.

<sup>46</sup> MN i 73.

<sup>47</sup> *Vimalatthavilāsini* (commentary on the *Vimānavatthu* of the Khuddaka-Nikāya), p. 4.

which is identical to certain descriptions of Buddha's awakening in the third watch of the night, is as follows:

He knows as it really is, 'this is suffering.' He knows as it really is, 'this is the cause of suffering.' He knows as it really is, 'this is the cessation of suffering.' He knows as it really is, 'this is the path leading to the cessation of suffering.' He knows as it really is, 'these are the *āsavas*.' He knows as it really is, 'this is the cause of the *āsavas*.' He knows as it really is, 'this is the destruction of the *āsavas*.' He knows as it really is, 'this is the path leading to the destruction of the *āsavas*.' And through this knowledge and vision, his mind is liberated from the *āsava* of sensual desire, his mind is liberated from the *āsava* of desire for continued existence, his mind is liberated from the *āsava* of ignorance. The knowledge arises in him, 'this is liberation,' and he knows: 'Birth is ended, the pure life has been led, done is what is to be done, there is no further life in these conditions.'<sup>48</sup>

This is likened to a person with good eyesight seeing the oysters, gravel, and fish in a clear pool.<sup>49</sup> This *abhiññā* is said to be the final fruit of the *samaṇa*'s life, more excellent and perfect than the previous fruits, which include the five other *abhiññās*. The *āsavas* or influential impurities of sensual desire (*kāma*), desire for continued existence (*bhava*), and ignorance (*avijjā*), which, along with hatred (*dosa*), are the main causes of attachment to *samsāra*, and with their elimination comes *nibbāna*. Ancient South Asian Buddhists and modern Western scholars alike distinguish this as the distinctively Buddhist *abhiññā*, knowledge of which prevents misuse or misinterpretation of the other five higher knowledges. Not surprisingly, it is called the supermundane (*lokuttara*) *abhiññā*, since it is equivalent to the attainment of *nibbāna*. The sixth *abhiññā* is the criterion of arahant hood; the *arahant* had to know for himself/herself that his/her *āsavas*, his/her obsessions, were destroyed. The Pāli commentaries call it *arahattasādhana*, the "proving or producing of arahant hood."

So, essentially, liberating awakening is finally gained through the sixth *abhiññā*, since the final requirement is that one verify it

<sup>48</sup> DN i 84.

<sup>49</sup> *ibid.*

by knowledge of the destruction of the *āsavas*. But what is most intriguing about this part of the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* and identical sections of some other *suttas* – something quite unusual which scholars apparently have failed to see as noteworthy – is that these texts describe that by directing one’s mind to the destruction of the *āsavas* while abiding in the fourth *jhāna*, liberation can be attained. This would seem to directly contradict the paths of those who are said to be “liberated by mind” (*cetovimutta*) and “liberated in both ways” (*ubhatobhāgavimutta*), since these forms of liberation involve attainment of even higher states of meditative absorption – the *arūpa samāpattis* or “formless states of meditative attainment” – as a means to liberation, as well as the path of those adepts said to be “liberated by insight” (*paññāvimutta*), since they do not even attain the lower *jhānas* as part of the liberating discipline. So, what we seemingly have here is a description of another way to *nibbāna*. Furthermore, it also should be noted that the descriptions in these texts do mirror certain descriptions of both Buddha’s awakening experience and his *parinibbāna*, which are achieved via the fourth *jhāna*.<sup>50</sup>

It must also be noted that it is only in the context of a few texts that liberation is presented as being attained solely through realization of the *abhiññās* in the fourth *jhāna*. Much more frequently found are passages which acknowledge that it is necessary to cultivate insight (*vipassanā*), in addition to ethics (*sīla*) and the high states of *samādhi* or concentration that are the hallmark of *samathabhāvanā* or “mental cultivation of tranquility.” For example, we have the stock phrase, “he should fulfill the moral precepts, be intent upon internal serenity of mind, be possessed of insight...”<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> The description of the Buddha’s awakening taking place while absorbed in the fourth *jhāna* is found at MN i 247–249, and the description of the Buddha entering into *parinibbāna* via the fourth *jhāna* is found at DN ii 156 and SN i 157–158.

<sup>51</sup> MN i 33–36; *et freq.*

## II. Conclusion

While we have seen at the outset of this paper that the early Pāli materials display an ambivalent and even critical attitude towards the use of supernormal powers, it is clear that no picture of Buddhism's ideal figures (not only does the chief disciple Moggallāna come to mind here, but Buddha himself is associated with many miraculous feats which space has not permitted me to look at here), nor any picture of its pedagogical, epistemological, and soteriological concerns, would be complete without consideration of the *abhiññās*. While we have seen that there were path alternatives that apparently did not involve cultivation of the *abhiññās*, such is the diversity of the early Pāli discourses that there are very important discussions, such as those found in the significant *Sāmaññāphala Sutta* (certainly a major statement on early Indian Buddhist and Theravādin soteriology) that place the *abhiññās* at the very heart of the Buddhist endeavor. The description of no less crucial an event than Buddha's own awakening experience also makes at least some particular higher knowledges central realizations. Essentially, the *abhiññās* confirm an underappreciated conviction of much of these texts, which is that certain crucial Buddhist forms of knowledge and insight can be developed not just through *vipassanābhāvanā* but through *samathabhāvanā* and its *jhāna* states of deep concentration and mindfulness as well. As is said on several occasions in the *suttas*, "It is natural that one in a state of concentration knows and sees things as they really are."<sup>52</sup> The *abhiññās* were reckoned by compilers of the *suttas* as both the corollary and sometimes crowning features of arahant hood, and in many stock phrases and formulas, *abhiññā* is listed among the chief values of Buddhism. For example, they are virtually equated with the religion's final goal in the stock phrase, "this pure life leads to complete detachment, to freedom from desire, to cessation, to peace, to higher knowledge, to complete awakening, to *nibbāna*."<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> AN v 3, v 313; *et freq.*

<sup>53</sup> DN ii 251; *et freq.*

Although some of the *abhiññās*, particularly *iddhi* and divine ear, could not always be seen as highly valuable in and of themselves, they certainly could function at least as reliable signs of progress along the path of meditation practice, as indications that that one is transcending the normal limits of the phenomenal world to which one is bound. As for the power of mind-reading, it could be a beneficial teaching device and was clearly distinguished as the only foolproof way of assessing others' levels of spiritual attainment. We have also seen that certain *abhiññās*, especially knowledge of past lives and divine eye, were deemed highly useful by the tradition for the purpose of experiential illumination and confirmation of certain Buddhist truths, such as *saṃsāra*, *kamma*, *dukkha*, *anicca*, and *nibbāna*. And, as is often repeated in the *suttas*, the sixth *abhiññā* affirms the Four Noble Truths. The Buddha is famous for saying that his teaching is verifiable by experience (*ehi-passika*).<sup>54</sup> Through meditation, the adept is deemed able to extend the normal limits of human experience and knowledge and, by attaining the *abhiññās*, one is enabled to experientially substantiate key Buddhist teachings. Thus on many levels, some significant early Pāli material appears to insist that the *abhiññās* provide insights into many of the most significant truth claims of Buddhism.

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Association of Buddhist Studies

Volume 33 Number 1–2 2010 (2011)

## Articles

William CHU

*The timing of Yogācāra resurgence in the Ming dynasty  
(1368–1643)* . . . . . 5

Vincent ELTSCHINGER

*Ignorance, epistemology and soteriology – Part II* . . . . . 27

Richard F. NANCE

*Tall tales, tathāgatas, and truth – On the “privileged lie” in  
Indian Buddhist literature.* . . . . . 75

Alexander WYNNE

*The ātman and its negation – A conceptual and chronologi-  
cal analysis of early Buddhist thought* . . . . . 103

## Indian Buddhist metaethics

Contributions to a panel at the XV<sup>th</sup> Congress of the International  
Association of Buddhist Studies, Atlanta, 23–28 June 2008

Guest editor: Martin T. Adam

Peter HARVEY

*An analysis of factors related to the kusala/akusala quality  
of actions in the Pāli tradition* . . . . . 175

Abraham VÉLEZ DE CEA

*Value pluralism in early Buddhist ethics* . . . . . 211

Martin T. ADAM

*No self, no free will, no problem – Implications of the Anatta-  
lakkhaṇa Sutta for a perennial philosophical issue* . . . . . 239

Bronwyn FINNIGAN

*Buddhist metaethics* . . . . . 267

Stephen JENKINS

*On the auspiciousness of compassionate violence* . . . . . 299

Jay L. GARFIELD

*What is it like to be a bodhisattva? Moral phenomenology in  
Śāntideva's Bodhicaryāvatāra* . . . . . 333

Tom J. F. TILLEMANS

*Madhyamaka Buddhist ethics* . . . . . 359

## **Miracles and superhuman powers in South and Southeast Asian Buddhist traditions**

Contributions to a panel at the XV<sup>th</sup> Congress of the International  
Association of Buddhist Studies, Atlanta, 23–28 June 2008

Guest editor: David V. Fiordalis

David V. FIORDALIS

*Miracles in Indian Buddhist narratives and doctrine* . . . . . 381

Bradley S. CLOUGH

*The higher knowledges in the Pāli Nikāyas and Vinaya.* . . . . . 409

Kristin SCHEIBLE

*Priming the lamp of dhamma – The Buddha’s miracles in the  
Pāli Mahāvamsa* . . . . . 435

Patrick PRANKE

*On saints and wizards – Ideals of human perfection and  
power in contemporary Burmese Buddhism* . . . . . 453

Rachelle M. SCOTT

*Buddhism, miraculous powers, and gender – Rethinking the  
stories of Theravāda nuns.* . . . . . 489

Luis O. GÓMEZ

*On Buddhist wonders and wonder-working.* . . . . . 513

•

*Notes on the contributors* . . . . . 555