

1 Introduction

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This book is not only a study of some aspects of the Buddhist path of liberation as presented in the Theravāda sources, but also a study of some of these sources. The first aim is to enrich our knowledge concerning the final stages of an important early summary of the path, namely the creation of a special ‘body made of mind’ (*manomayakāya*),¹ the capability to perform many kinds of psychophysical power (*iddhividhā*),² and the achievement of higher knowledges (*abhiññā*), consisting of the following forms of knowledge:

1 For practical reasons, when I am not referring to a particular passage, I will often use the compound ‘*manomayakāya*’, which is mainly used within post-canonical texts (see, for instance, Mp I 209). The tendency within the canonical texts is to not unify the terms ‘*manomaya*’ and ‘*kāya*’ in a single compound (e.g. *manomayaṃ kāyaṃ*; D I 77).

2 In this book, I am using the unorthodox form *iddhividhā*, since it is not clear if the stemmatic form is *iddhividha* (masculine/neuter) or *iddhividhā* (feminine) given that the compound is often declined according to cases which could support both readings. This is the case, for example, of *iddhividham*, which could grammatically be the singular accusative case of the masculine, feminine, and neuter, or also *iddhividhāya*, which could be a masculine singular dative or also a feminine singular instrumental, ablative, genitive, or locative (at least, it is possible to exclude the neuter). At other times, the texts seem to have chosen a specific stemmatic form, however there is not a complete consistency within the *Tipiṭaka*. For instance, the alternative reading *iddhividhāyo* in D III 112 (see note 1 within the work) could grammatically be only a feminine plural nominative or accusative, just like the form *iddhividhāsu* (D III 112-13) could only be a feminine declined in the plural locative. However, other evidences provide a completely opposite interpretation, such as the compound *iddhividhañāna* (e.g. Tikap II 166; Paṭis I 111), which seems to support *iddhividha* as the correct reading and is corroborated by other passages that include the wording *iddhividhe nāṇaṃ* (e.g. Paṭis I 111; Vibh 334), in which *iddhividha* is declined in the masculine/neuter locative singular (grammatically, it could also be a feminine vocative singular, but it would not fit the context at all).



the element of the divine ear (*dibbasotadhātu*); knowledge by comprehension of the minds of others (*cetopariyañña*); knowledge of recollection of former existences (*pubbenivāsānussatiñña*); and, knowledge of the fall and rise of beings (*cutūpapātañña*).³ All these extraordinary capacities occur in a version of the Buddhist path of liberation adopted by the majority of the *suttas* (discourses) in the *Sīlakkhandhavagga* (The Division with the Sections on Morality), the first section in the *Dīghanikāya* (The Collection of Long [Discourses]). In the Pāli texts of the Theravāda tradition, the full exposition of the path is only presented in the *Sāmaññaphalasutta* (The Discourse on the Fruits of the Ascetic Life; D 2) and it is abbreviated in the following *suttas*. The version of the path provided by the *Sāmaññaphalasutta* is the canonical context considered in the present book. A proper understanding and appreciation of the *raison d'être* of these extraordinary capacities within the path is still a *desideratum* and, therefore, a worthwhile topic to delve into. The second aim is to understand how these concepts developed within the Pāli literature from their canonical exposition to their commentarial explanation. Commentaries, indeed, would form part of the third aim, namely, to improve our knowledge concerning the Pāli commentarial literature, a topic that is relatively young compared to the study of the canonical literature.

In the pursuit of these aims, the sources considered cover a wide period of time – over one thousand years. The ultimate limit is the actual Pāli commentarial literature that is from the V century AD onwards,⁴ whereas the oldest sources are the Vedic texts, whose dating is a notoriously debated matter. For the scope of the present book, the Vedic texts aim to provide evidence for part of the Buddhist ideological and speculative background. Most of them, indeed, most likely predate the period in which the historical Buddha was preaching, namely approximately the V century BC.⁵ This wide time span forced me to be selective, but – and although I cannot claim to have been exhaustive – I am confident that a good deal of relevant material on the analysed topics has been considered. Therefore, this book is, at least, 1) a starting point for the study of the *manomayakāya*, *iddhividhā*, and the other *abhiññās*, with particular reference to their relevance in the canonical Buddhist path and their diachronic developments; 2) an exploratory study on the ways in which the Pāli commentarial literature (and more broadly the Theravāda Buddhist exegesis) works; and, 3) incidentally, an assessment (or sometimes a reassessment) of the importance of some sources for the study of Indian Buddhism, in particular the Theravāda tradition, such as the Vedic texts and the **Vimuttimaggā* (*Jiětuō dào lùn* 解脱道論; T 1648).

It might seem, *prima facie*, an overambitious task to write a book concerning two arguments (*viz.* extraordinary capacities and commentaries/exegesis) that may seem to require two discrete dissertations. On the one

3 As discussed below, the last *abhiññā* which concerns the knowledge of extinction of the noxious influxes (*āsavakkhayañña*) is not part of the present study.

4 The V century AD could be the safest dating if Toshiichi Endo (2014, 106-9) is right in assuming 428-429 AD as the possible date of composition of the *Visuddhimaggā*, the vanguard of the Pāli commentaries.

5 There is no scholarly consensus concerning the precise dates of the Buddha, although, in the words of Rupert Gethin: “a detailed examination of all the available data and arguments by scholars in recent years has resulted in a general tendency to bring the date of the Buddha considerably forward and place his death much nearer 400 BCE than 500 BCE.” (1998, 14). Gethin is most likely referring to the contributions gathered in Bechert 1991-92.

hand, they actually deserve studies exclusively devoted to them individually. On the other hand, sometimes different topics are related to each other in ways that do not allow a separate treatment; and this seems to be the case. To be more specific, we may note that one who wishes to approach the study of Buddhist extraordinary capacities in a diachronic way cannot afford to not know how the commentarial literature and, broadly speaking, the exegesis works and has developed over time. However, the study of the Pāli commentarial literature is still in its earliest days and thus we still lack a standard approach to such literature. Approaching the problem from a different angle, we may note that one interested in the study of the commentarial literature may face the problem that commentaries are commentaries on something. To put it in other words, it is fair to assume that in the study of the commentarial literature, some other Buddhist topics would inevitably be involved, and usually when one spends a plenty of time on a topic there is an actual possibility that new insights into that topic may arise. This is especially true when the topic at stake is a neglected one. Therefore, this book is the result of synergic efforts to combine two studies that are interconnected. In general terms, the work attempts to answer the following questions: what picture of the Buddhist extraordinary capacities would emerge if we would study them with a diachronic approach? In doing this, what we can infer from the ways the commentaries provide the exegeses?

1.1 Gaps in the Prior Research and the Need for a Different Approach

The main reason to study the final stages involving the achievement of extraordinary capacities in the Buddhist path of liberation is that previous studies on the same Buddhist path have focused on other former stages (a detailed discussion is provided below in Chapter 2), overlooking the final ones. However, this book does not merely aim to fill a gap in existing studies but, in some respects, is a study entirely of its own. The former studies on this long and stereotyped Buddhist path of liberation were almost exclusively based on the study of the Pāli *Sāmaññaphalasutta* (= Sanskrit: *Śrāmaṇyaphalasūtra*) and parallel versions in other languages (such as Sanskrit, Chinese, Tibetan and Gāndhārī) belonging to other Buddhist traditions, rather than Theravāda. Thus, they were synchronic studies, giving pre-eminence to the comparison of parallel versions of the path treated as almost contemporary testimonies (notwithstanding some translations are late, they were presumably based on older and early versions), whereas this book opted for a diachronic approach and, therefore, aims to trace a line of development in a specific tradition: that of Theravāda.⁶ Subsequently, it was not possible to follow a beaten path in pursuit of this research.

Generally speaking, the *manomayakāya*, *iddhividhā*, and the other *abhiññās* received less systematic treatments if compared with other Buddhist doctrinal ideas (one can consider, for example, the incalculable

⁶ The use of the term Theravāda has been debated at length. In this regard, there are the recent worthy works of Gethin (2012) and Anālayo (2013; 2023a, 459-95). I use this term to gather under the same umbrella the tradition of the Pāli texts, both canonical and commentarial, and that represented by the Chinese **Vimuttimaggā* (*Jiětuō dào lùn* 解脫道論; T 1648).

number of studies either on or that mention the four noble truths). This is due to some historical reasons. Modern scholars in the late XIX and early XX century engaged the task of recovering the historical Buddha⁷ and the original Buddhism. It is reasonable to assume that these two tasks were strictly connected to each other. If there was a historical figure that really preached in ancient India, there should also be an original and historical message or doctrine that was preached. However, the search for a historical figure behind the character of the Buddha led scholars to deprive Buddhism of its mythological and supernatural features. The euhemeristic assumption that a historical truth acquired mythological features over time was inspired by the textual method used in the quest to find the historical Jesus.⁸ If the discarding of fabulous material may seem quite reasonable in the task of outlining a historical biography, it is not necessarily so in outlining a doctrine or a thought. The Buddha, as a historical figure, lived in a historical context and period in which myths and beliefs in the supernatural proliferated. Therefore, the fact that some of them flowed into the Buddha's doctrine is not unreasonable but rather is coherent with the naturalistic fact that individuals are affected by their historical period and society. Notwithstanding what now might seem reasonable, the scholars that centuries ago engaged the modern study of Buddhism extended the demythologising trend applied to the study of the historical Buddha to its original teachings and ideas. Therefore, the renowned scholar Louis de La Vallée Poussin wrote that “[i]f we rightly understand the real character of Buddhism, what Buddhism ought to be according to its cardinal tenets, there is no possible connexion between Buddhism and magic”, he later noted that “‘historic Buddhism’ is not, in every respect what Buddhism ought to be” (1908, 255). The latter phrase he wrote aimed to introduce the concept of *ṛddhi* (Sanskrit; Pāli: *iddhi*), namely “‘superhuman’ activities, which to some extent would be understood by Europeans as magical, and which are ‘very good Buddhism’” (1908, 255). Louis de La Vallée Poussin acknowledges the practice of *iddhis* as an actual part of the Buddhist tradition, but at the same time he somehow sees it as not conforming to the Buddhist final goal.⁹ Regarding de La Vallée Poussin, it seems that in this case he constructed the Buddhist identity in opposition to the Vedic or Hindu one which was supposed to have a strong magical and supernatural nature.¹⁰ Therefore, despite notable exceptions, the general trend that became established was

7 The Buddha's historicity is a topic that has recently received scholarly attention. In this regard, see Drewes 2017; 2023a; 2023b; Levman 2019; Wynne 2019; von Hinüber 2019; 2023.

8 “Earlier scholars had considered the legendary elements as an addition to a basis of historical facts; once freed from these legendary elements, the historical truth about the Buddha would become clear. It was usual to apply this method - called the subtraction method by La Vallée Poussin - before Senart's time and also after him. It was the same method of historical criticism that was developed by New Testament scholars for studying the life of Jesus” (de Jong 1997, 28).

9 “The only aim of the Buddhist monk is ‘nirvāṇa to be attained in this life,’ [...] All the machinery of intellectual and moral life is organized with a view to this” (La Vallée Poussin 1908, 255).

10 We can deduce that from passages like: “[a] *fortiori*, in contrast with Vedism and Brāhmanism, Buddhism ignores all the magical theories connected with sacrifice, worship, or asceticism as a means of salvation. As for as every-day or trivial magic is concerned, its efficiency is acknowledged, but Buddhists are strictly forbidden to practise it” (1908, 255) and also “[w]hatever precautions the Order took to avoid all paganism and superstition, there is, nevertheless, a Buddhist magic. It was impossible to guard against Hindu infiltrations” (1908, 257).

that of neglecting these kinds of topic.¹¹ We can see a confirmation of this trend in Edward Conze's complaints, such as when he wrote that:

There is so much that is eminently rational in Buddhism that the importance of the occult in it has often been underestimated, especially by modern European authors. (Conze 1953, 103)¹²

The fact that the study of what can be considered magical, mythological, supernatural, etc., was a neglected issue for a long period of time is a fact shared with the broader field of studies on Indian religions, in particular with the study of Yoga or, more broadly speaking, yogic practices and attainments.¹³ In a miscellany volume edited by Knut A. Jacobsen, entitled *Yoga Powers: Extraordinary Capacities Attained Through Meditation and Concentration* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2012), it is stated in the very first page of the introduction that:

This book is about a neglected topic in the research on yoga and South Asian meditation traditions: the yoga powers, the extraordinary capacities that, according to many South Asian religious traditions, are gained by the yoga practice of meditation and concentration. (Jacobsen 2012, 1)

In this book which aimed to fill a gap in the study of Indian religions, there is also a chapter written by Bradley S. Clough entitled *The Cultivation of Yogic Powers in the Pāli Path Manuals of Theravāda Buddhism* (= Clough 2012), in which the Buddhist extraordinary capacities are described drawing on material from the exegetical literature. Clough uses the same main sources adopted by the present dissertation, but does so following an antithetical approach, namely a synchronic one. Instead of paying attention to the differences between the accounts, he preferred to consider the similarities in order to write a descriptive survey for each individual power, synthesising the method to develop the power (mostly, and sometimes exclusively, drawing material from the *Visuddhimagga*) and implicitly assuming the existence of an 'archetypical' set of instructions, which is reflected in different ways by the sources. This approach can be useful to obtain an initial and superficial knowledge on the subject but hides the complexity behind the various layers of exegetical literature. Despite similarities in the many accounts concerning the same power, it is often not possible to reduce the exegesis to a single model on the basis of the multiple different interpretations reported by the exegetical literature. By way of example, in Clough's interpretation of the *iddhividhā* (2012, 79-87), the first power which concerns the multiplication of the body (*eko pi hutvā bahudhā hoti*) is described in a handful of lines (2012, 84), silently adjusting the *Visuddhimagga's* exposition, which, instead, is quite odd since it prescribes to enter in and go out from the

11 Remarkable exceptions are, for instance, Demiéville 1927; La Vallée Poussin 1931; Conze 1953; French 1977.

12 According to Luis O. Gómez (1977, 221), Edward Conze contributed positively to change the academic orientation of the subject.

13 In this regard, see Jacobsen 2012, 12-16 and De Notariis 2019a, 229-31 (I reused some of the arguments in the conclusion of the present work in § 10.1).

meditative absorption (*jhāna*) twice (see below § 7.4.4).¹⁴ Another example that shows the tendency to avoid problematic evidence is Clough's treatment of the *pubbenivāsānussatiñāṇa* (2012, 89-90). This *abhiññā* is outlined only referring to the *Visuddhimagga*'s account, avoiding to even mention the fact that the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* reports a completely different method (which involves the *paṭiccasamuppāda* 'dependent origination') to develop this higher knowledge (see below § 8.3, and especially 8.3.3). These examples also demonstrate the importance of how we look at the sources, especially in the case of the exegesis, which, in the Pāli commentarial literature above all, displays a high degree of complexity.

The study of the Pāli commentaries started later if compared with the study of the canon, quite simply because they were published later.¹⁵ Their nature and the related issues entailed in the study of Buddhism will be discussed further in Chapter 5, where it is also highlighted that the study of these commentaries was typically niche Japanese research.¹⁶ Here, it is just worth noting that the commentarial literature is a quite tricky *corpus* of texts, given that the final form that has come down to us belongs to the V century AD, whereas the material it contains may be much older than that period. Therefore, accentuating one characteristic or the other, the commentarial literature can be conceived as either a necessary and early source for the study of the canonical texts or, conversely, as a very late material containing a late exegesis which has definitely lost memory of the earlier historical context. In this book, we shall attempt to avoid either of these two extremes. The commentaries will be conceived as they are, namely a controversial collection of exegeses which might be potentially very old, but whose actual dating is hard to establish. Then, how can we study them, and how can we use them as a useful source for the study of the extraordinary capacities? There is a valid answer for both questions, namely we should observe how the commentaries 'behave' in providing the exegeses and interpretations. This plain approach will allow us to gather data in an unprejudiced way, drawing conclusions only after having compared the exegeses with each other, searching for recurring patterns or possible explanations for some given exegetical accounts.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that there is a widespread agreement among scholars in considering the extraordinary capacities attained during the Buddhist path of liberation as mere by-products or outcomes from the meditative practice, some of them with a soteriological meaning at best. To put it simply (I will deal more at length with this topic below in Chapter 2), the last one, the *āsavakkhayañāṇa* (the knowledge of extinction of the noxious influxes), is undoubtedly the most Buddhist since it involves the four noble truths,¹⁷ whereas the *pubbenivāsānussatiñāṇa* and *cutūpapātāñāṇa* are often

14 In this regard, Clough writes: "[f]irst is the ability to multiply ('Having become one, he becomes many...'). Taking the number of forms that one wishes to produce as the object of concentration, one enters the fourth *jhāna*, emerges, and resolves, 'Let me become a hundred,' for example" (2012, 84).

15 "By 1930 all five Nikāya were published and publication of the *Aṭṭhakathās* had begun" (de Jong 1997, 27).

16 There are, of course, exceptions in more recent times, just as the studies of scholars such as Lance Cousins, Aruna Gamage, Rupert Gethin, Oskar von Hinüber, and Petra Kieffer-Pülz, to name but a few.

17 Concerning this *abhiññā*, see the preliminary material gathered in Appendix 1.

believed to be able to bring a knowledge with a soteriological significance. The *cetopariyañña* is less relevant from a soteriological perspective, but it has often been highlighted that telepathy may help a teacher to understand the mind of a pupil (or a prospective one; cf. § 2.1). The Buddha often read the thoughts of other people to impart the most appropriate teaching according to the mental inclinations of his interlocutor. The significance and the importance of the *dibbasotadhātu* and the *iddhividhā* are still more doubtful, let alone those of the *manomayakāya*. In this regard, we still lack an explanatory theory that can give a reason for the existence and the significance of all these powers in the Buddhist path without overlooking, neglecting or delegitimising some of them.

1.2 The Contribution the Book Makes to the Present State of our Knowledge

This book is a study on the final stages in a version of the Buddhist path of liberation shared by a major part of the *suttas* in the *Sīlakkhandhavagga*, and takes into account canonical sources as well as exegetical ones. In this regard, it aims to enrich our knowledge concerning some neglected stages and highlights how the meditational powers were considered a significant part of the path by the Theravāda exegetes, something that has been overlooked in many more recent studies. The book also argues that there may be a possible significance of the *manomayakāya*, *iddhividhā*, and the other *abhiññās* within the Buddhist path. There seems to be, indeed, an enhancement of the body, which is gradually divinised and freed from the bounds of the matter. A divine body allows the performance of extraordinary acts and feats, its senses – divinised as well – make possible an increased and expanded knowledge that brings truths of soteriological significance. Therefore, some of these findings have the potential to enrich our understanding of Buddhism as a whole. The gnostic element, here, is not a mere intellectual knowledge, but is a kind of knowledge that is personally gained, direct and experiential. With this in mind, the meditational powers would not only be mere meditative outcomes in the Buddhist path of liberation, but effective means to attain liberation. This is a good example of results that a detailed study of elements soft-pedalled by previous studies can provide. This de-emphasis to which these materials have been subjected has produced an imbalance in our understanding of Buddhism, which has often been unrealistically interpreted as a set of ‘rational’ practices, whereas, I argue, there is a divine dimension that is directly involved in pursuing the Buddhist soteriological goal.

In the pursuit of the analysis of the extraordinary capacities, the way through which the commentaries provide the exegeses has been noticed. Therefore, it seems that the commentaries were subjected to a process which has been called the ‘interpretative accretion process’ (see § 7.4.4.1) given that interpretations tend to accumulate over time, one upon the other, integrating the old with the new. This process could potentially underline many other commentarial accounts, but the analysis should be conducted on a case-by-case basis. At least, the book provides a non-judgemental method, a conceptual tool for using and understanding the commentarial literature that can be applied further in the future to other topics. A close reading of the commentarial accounts shows that it is also possible to propose

some conjectures concerning the lost sources used to write the actual Pāli commentaries. This kind of work is necessarily speculative, but nonetheless exciting and, perhaps, if conducted systematically, worthy and profitable.

Finally, the study is a first attempt to untangle the complexity behind the exegetical accounts on the extraordinary capacities. It does it highlighting both the differences and similarities in the expositions of the methods to perform these meditative powers. In the case of the *manomayakāya*, its early canonical connections with some Vedic texts (especially the Upaniṣads) have been demonstrated, a fact that makes it even more evident that from the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* onwards there was a departure from the old canonical context. The diachronic analysis, from the canon to the commentaries, showed that Buddhaghosa's interpretation of the term '*karaṇḍa*' is untenable from a philological point of view. In addition, a likely reason has been found as to why he did it, and a possible source from which he borrowed the textual passage he uses to justify his position. Therefore, this case study demonstrates how it is both useful and necessary to apply a 'philology of ideas' to the study of the Pāli commentaries. This can shed new light not only on the reliability of the Pāli commentaries for the study of the early canonical texts, but also on the topics at stake, such as the *manomayakāya* in the present case. Similarly, the analysis of the *iddhividhā* and the other *abhiññās* shows that each power requires such analysis on a case-by-case basis. Incidentally, in its pursuit of analysis of the meditational powers, this book provides a useful collection of sources with some critical remarks on the accounts provided by them.

1.3 Methodological Reflections

[T]he method one uses to try to find something out
must always depend on the particulars of the case
(Gombrich 2009, 92)

The method used in the present study has been, to some extent, flexible. The reason is that it was almost impossible to maintain the same method for everything; the sources themselves have driven this research in different directions. However, there is something that has never been abandoned, namely a diachronic approach. When referring to a 'diachronic approach' I mean the action of paying attention to the chronology of the sources, even if it is only a relative one. This does not mean to blindly establish the antiquity or modernity of ideas solely on the basis of the chronology of the texts. Especially as the Pāli commentaries warn us of this kind of approach. As it has been highlighted by some scholars,¹⁸ the Pāli commentaries on the Abhidhamma may have accommodated material even more conservative than the earlier commentaries written by Buddhaghosa. This does not mean that a line of development is impossible to establish, but suggests that the task is not properly linear. A diachronic approach can help us to not yield to the temptation of assuming a *sine tempore* static tradition. The very fact that the sources have a different chronology makes the differences in the exposition a significant topic. The developments can, of course, be coherent

¹⁸ E.g. Cousins 1981, 38-9; 1992, 55-6; [2013/2014] 2015, 397-9 and Kim 1999, 10-12 (= 2023, 9-11).

with the previous tradition, but are developments nonetheless, in the same way that a new branch of a tree resembles the tree and the other branches, but is nonetheless a new one.

We should also be cautious not to fall into the trap of the ‘reasonable exegesis’. What I mean by this is that when a reader does not understand a passage, they may often refer to the later exegesis to find a way to interpret it. What this reader will often find is a reasonable reading. However, the fact that an exegetical interpretation makes sense does not mean that it is the right one. The commentators were not unprepared exegetes, but learned monks of their time, probably among the most learned, if not the most; it is therefore unsurprising that a reasonable interpretation can be found. These learned monks, however, were not writing for a modern academic audience; their task was to keep the Buddhist doctrine alive. If we treat the Buddhist *corpus* of literature as a living organism, we can consider the commentarial literature as a tool to keep the organism competitive in its environment. It is the adaptive surface of the body of texts, malleable enough to react to the external forces. The Pāli Buddhist literature, indeed, as a living organism, has a more fixed kernel, and the major changes are detected in the younger strata, which would be the external part of a living body. If we consider the animal kingdom, it can be determined that there are some inner structures shared by many species which actually look very different from each other. The spinal column, for instance, is shared by mammals, snakes, fishes, birds, etc. Despite the outward differences among these animals, an inner structure survives over time. We may also note that another inner structure shared by animals is a ‘tube structure’. The tube, in the human species, runs from the mouth to the anus. If we think about a very elementary form of life, such as a worm, we should admit that even if it is without the spinal column, the ‘tube structure’ still occurs. Equally, in Buddhist literature there are some structures which are more resilient than others. Some of them are, as highlighted by Rupert Gethin (1992), the *mātikās* (lit. matrixes) and some other lists that can provide an inner structure for a text. Other parts of Buddhist literature which are quite fixed generally consist of some formulaic expressions, which are often called pericopes (following biblical scholarship). Taking the *Sāmaññaphalasutta* as an example, we may note that not only is the structure of the list of the Buddhist path of liberation quite regular among various Buddhist traditions exemplified by the Chinese and Sanskrit texts (Gethin 2020), but that the pericopes also show a high degree of fixity. Therefore, a diachronic study that focuses solely on Theravāda sources aims to trace a line of development within a specific tradition.

Given the huge number of sources, it was necessary to narrow the research field. Starting from the *Sāmaññaphalasutta*, we studied its exegesis, which in turn has its own exegesis and so on. To summarise, the exegetical accounts which have over time gradually commented upon each other have been chosen with the aim of following an exegetical line. There are many reasons to justify this approach. First, we may note that this is the most natural way to approach this kind of literature. If a reader is reading text X and wants to know something more about the topic, they would then consult text Y commenting on X. If text Y involves difficulties, they would check text Z commenting on Y, and so on. It is less likely that the reader would instead check every single existing text. In the past, without our current software or lists of concordance, cross-searches could have been even more difficult. Of course, this does not mean that the sources were considered in isolation,

only that pre-eminence has been given to texts that comment on each other. Another reason is that if text Y is commenting on text X, we can assume that the exegetical explanation fits the context entirely. In the case of another exegetical account that is commenting on a similar topic in another text, we may wonder how much the explanation would fit our specific case. The same pericope in different contexts may involve different exegeses, given that any situation can have its own peculiarities and specificities.

This narrowing of the field allowed me to adopt an exhaustive approach. By an 'exhaustive approach', I mean exhaustive reading (and sometimes also translation, if necessary) of the passages involved. This is a particularly useful approach when we are dealing with an untranslated text. If we limit ourselves to read only what *prima facie* seems to fit the topic of our research, there occurs the situation in which you know what you have found but not what you are missing. This approach involves a lot of effort, is time-consuming, and might provide a large amount of translated material which, sometimes, does not even provide useful information concerning the research topic. However, I think that this is an intellectually honest approach, because it is not possible to predict in advance where and when the results will be discovered. It is like the Buddhist path of liberation, you can practice the prescribed instructions, but you do not know when and if the liberation will be reached, it just happens. If my reader glimpsed a slight criticism of the modern academic world, they would not be inaccurate in their observation. In our time, the motto is 'publish or perish', an attitude towards research that forces people to produce as many results as they can in the shortest possible time. However, innovative results from a creative work can hardly be produced – they can only be found. We can plan to achieve results from a mechanical work, not from a creative one. And when we are asked to find something new in texts older than two thousand years, to understand them, the task can hardly be mechanical, rather it should indeed be creative. Therefore, I can state that I have mechanically gathered the research material, I have read and translated it, made schemes and tables, but the new ideas, what is original in my work, arrived in unpredictable ways. In the passage between the ignorance and wisdom, there is always something magical, inexplicable.

1.3.1 Main Buddhist Sources

Turning again to the method, as revealed above, my approach to the sources was quite flexible because the sources themselves do not allow a blind systematic treatment. To put it in other words, a source that had a paramount importance in the analysis of a topic could turn out to be completely useless, or at least of little use, in the study of another topic. Therefore, in this study there is an underlying structure, which was then adapted according to the specific situation. This basic framework starts from the account in the *Sāmaññaphalasutta*, which received a quite innovative exegesis in the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*. The *Paṭisambhidāmagga*'s account was factored into that of the **Vimuttimaggā*. Furthermore, both the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* and **Vimuttimaggā* were considered by the *Visuddhimaggā*'s exegesis. Complementary to the *Visuddhimaggā* is the *Sumaṅgalavilāsinī* which is, together with the commentaries on the other principal Nikāyas,

conceived as an integrative work to the *magnum opus* of Buddhaghosa.¹⁹ The *Sumaṅgalavilāsinī*'s accounts concerning the *iddhividhā* and the other *abhiññās* were inserted into Appendix 2, since they only comment on the similes. Furthermore, the commentary on the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* called the *Saddhammappakāsinī* has also been taken into account. These are not the only sources considered in the present study but are the sources on which I was able to apply an exhaustive approach. Other Pāli texts were considered as well, according to the particularity of each individual case. Since some texts have not yet been translated into a European language, I offer my own translations in the book. For the *Saddhammappakāsinī*, only some translated passages were presented in the book, mainly for two reasons: 1) the text is full of quotations from other texts already translated; 2) there were, concerning some topics, too many pages involved. It would be worth analysing the *Saddhammappakāsinī* from the point of view of the reuse of texts and intertextuality. Unfortunately, this kind of analysis would have exceeded the limits of the present study. Moreover, I also offer my own translations for texts already translated by other scholars, such as the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* (translated by Bhikkhu Nāṇamoli 1982), *Visuddhimagga* (translated by Bhikkhu Nāṇamoli [1956] 2011), *Sumaṅgalavilāsinī* (translated by Bhikkhu Bodhi 1989). Concerning these texts, I do not regard my translations as an improvement, by contrast I have learned a good deal from the former translators. I have also translated the relevant sections of the **Vimuttimaggā*, which were formerly translated by N.R.M. Ehara, Soma Thera and Kheminda Thera (= Ehara et al. [1961] 1995) and more recently by Bhikkhu Nyanatusita (= Nyanatusita 2021). The latter translation has already corrected many mistakes made in the former one. I regard my translations as a slight improvement, if not for the beauty of the language, at least for the better interpretation I provide concerning some passages.

Especially with reference to the *iddhividhā* and the other *abhiññās*, an arbitrary decision has been made. That is to say, it was decided to systematically analyse the method to implement the powers rather than the narratives that involve these extraordinary capacities. Nonetheless, some narratives were taken into account, just as the one involving the Cūḷapanthaka's story (§ 7.4.4.2). The extraordinary capacities analysed are part of stock passages which are adapted to many contexts and narrative frameworks. Therefore, taking into account the numerous narrative contexts would have been out of the limits of the present study. However, as highlighted by the works of Steven Collins (1982; 1998), narratives are important (and often overlooked) sources for the study of Buddhist doctrines. For this reason, the narrative climax of the Buddhist path of liberation will be analysed in Chapter 9.

Finally, we should note that, in some cases, the analysis of what we can call the pre-history of Buddhism provided interesting results. If the Buddhist secular history starts from the historical Buddha preaching, then in using the term 'pre-history' I mean whatever source can provide insight into some concepts or ideas that might have been part of the Buddhist historical background. In this study, I opted for the Vedic texts as a source material for the study of the Buddhist background. This approach was particularly fruitful in the case of the *manomayakāya*, given that there is

¹⁹ *majjhe hi Visuddhimagga esa catunnam pi āgamānaṃ hi* (Sv I 2); see von Hinüber [2013/2014] 2015, 361.

the lexical correspondence of the term *manomaya* between the Buddhist and Upaniṣadic sources. Notwithstanding the lack of a similar, straightforward correspondence for the *iddhividhā* and the other *abhiññās*, the use of the Vedic texts contributes to the elaboration of some topics.

1.3.2 Limitations

The most obvious limitation, as mentioned above, concerns the wide period of time that the book covers. Therefore, I opted to study the extraordinary capacities in the context of an early and long version of the Buddhist path of liberation, and so I tried to be exhaustive at least with regard to the exegetical sources directly connected with it. In order to counterbalance the exegetical interpretation, the Vedic texts have been taken into account, providing a more balanced picture. We can consider the canonical evidence as analysed from two different perspectives, its past and its later interpretations:

Vedic Texts → Pāli Canon ← Exegesis

Surely, it would have been interesting to systematically consider the texts parallel to the Pāli *Sāmaññaphalasutta* to further investigate the original canonical context.²⁰ In this regard, sporadic references were made to the Chinese Dharmaguptaka *Cháng āhán jīng* 長阿含經 (T 1) and *Fóshuō jízhi guǒ jīng* 佛說寂志果經 (T 22; uncertain sectarian affiliation), and to the Sanskrit version preserved in the *Saṅghabhedavastu* (the latter especially), which is the last section of the Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya*. All this means that since the main Buddhist sources considered in the present study belong to the Theravāda tradition, the results should be primarily considered when referring to this Buddhist tradition as well.

An important omission in the present work is a careful study on the *āsavakkhayañāṇa*. This analysis would have involved an engagement in a full and detailed account of how Abhidhamma and commentarial sources understand the path (*magga*) and its fruit (*phala*) and the destruction of the *āsavas* (noxious influxes).²¹ The *āsavakkhayañāṇa*, from a Buddhist point of view, is the most important among the *abhiññās*, but from our point of view is the less marvellous in that it does not carry any capacity that is extraordinary in a secular sense. This *abhiññā* is the one that ostensibly carries a soteriological significance and, indeed, corresponds to the attainment of the Buddhist final goal. Therein it is the least controversial, given that its significance in the Buddhist path is apparent from both the Buddhists' and modern academics' points of view. With emphasis on the comprehension of the four noble truths and the absence of anything that can be regarded as magical or supernatural in our sense of the term, the *āsavakkhayañāṇa* may satisfy the view of those that see Buddhism as a 'rational' set of practices, perpetrating this early scholarly assumption. Instead, it is often forgotten that the *āsavakkhayañāṇa* is just the acme of a

20 In addition to the Pāli version, there are four Chinese versions, two complete Sanskrit versions and some Sanskrit fragments, one Tibetan version, and a Gāndhārī version which consists of the first half of the text (and, therefore, it unfortunately does not include the final stages of the Buddhist path of liberation). For a recent overview, see Allon 2024, 4-8.

21 In this regard, see the preliminary material gathered in Appendix 1.

path that involves less rational and more miraculous stages which are not regarded as less real or more imaginary than the final one.

Finally, the narratological approach was limited to only a few cases and certainly a wider and more comprehensive investigation of the narratives can be of some benefit. However, it is worth noting nonetheless as the extraordinary capacities mainly occur in the Buddhist texts in the form of stock passages and are adapted to many different narrative contexts. The present study is focused primarily on the analysis of these stock passages, namely of what is stable and fixed in other contexts. In this regard, it could be the starting point for future studies on the narratives involving meditative powers. Nonetheless, a narratological approach is not completely neglected since the book analyses some features of the Cūḷapanthaka's story (§ 7.4.4.2) and the sequence of the stages into the path from the narrative point of view (Chapter 9).

1.4 Outline of the Intervening Chapters

This book is divided in two parts. Part I (from Ch. 2 to Ch. 5) provides some preliminary remarks, introduces the most problematic sources and arguments before getting to the heart of the analysis. Since this book deals with many arguments and some of them are, from some points of view, controversial, I decided to provide some background information. Part I will start with the main protagonist of this book which contains the meditative powers at stake, namely the Buddhist path of liberation, its context and its studies. Successively, I will discuss some of my theoretical assumptions to use the Vedic texts in the study of the Buddhist canon. Thereafter, I will introduce the Abhidhammic doctrines of the 'consciousness process' (*cittavīthi*) and the 'momentariness' (*khaṇavāda*) to which a reader should be acquainted with in order to properly understand some later commentarial exegeses. Pāli commentaries, eventually, will be introduced and discussed. The logic structure is as follows: at first, the canonical context of the path is discussed, because it is the starting point; later its pre-history (Vedic texts); and to follow, its interpretations (Abhidhammic theories and commentaries). Part I is due to the need to explain my approach to the sources, which is not at all obvious, considering that commentaries are used by scholars in different ways, as are Vedic texts. I also regard it as important to make some brief historical digressions since I am convinced that the way we conceive the history of a given textual *corpus* profoundly influences our approach to it and the use we will make of it as well. Part II (from Ch. 6 to Ch. 9) analyses at length the *manomayakāya*, *iddhividhā* and the other *abhiññās*, ending with an assessment of these extraordinary capacities in the path of liberation. In outline, the book proceeds as follows:

Chapter 2 aims to contextualise the *manomayakāya*, *iddhividhā* and the other *abhiññās* according to the version of the path considered by the present study. It is highlighted how previous academic studies on the same long version of the Buddhist path have thus far avoided focusing on these stages, which could therefore conclude that this is essentially a neglected topic. One reason for this could be the tendency to gloss over their importance based on some rationalistic assumptions.

Chapter 3 argues for the importance of the early Brahmanical sources (especially the Upaniṣads) in the study of Indian Buddhism. After having

introduced the theme, the thorny problem of the relationship between Buddhism and the Upaniṣads is discussed with a particular reference to Johannes Bronkhorst's ideas (2007) that would overturn the standard relative chronology that would see some of the oldest Upaniṣads as predating the time of the historical Buddha and, then, as suitable sources to investigate the Buddhist background. Bronkhorst's arguments are rejected, and this paves the way for the use of these sources in the present study.

Chapter 4 introduces two Abhidhammic doctrines which should be considered in order to correctly understand some exegetical accounts. Namely, the doctrine of consciousness process (*cittavīthi*) and the doctrine of momentariness (*khaṇavāda*).

Chapter 5 initially discusses the word 'commentary' as a translation for the Pāli term '*aṭṭhakathā*', highlighting that 'commentary' covers a wider range of texts than '*aṭṭhakathā*'. Then, some reflections on the fact of being a commentary are presented, showing that a text is often called 'commentary' not only for its stylistic features, but also on the basis of other factors, such as the historical time or the authority that a tradition bestows it. Therefore, it would be better to consider the exegetical process as an ongoing process. Thereafter, some of the scholarly issues raised by the use of Pāli commentarial literature as a scholarly source for the study of the earlier canonical texts are discussed and, at the same time, the necessity of the Pāli commentaries for the study of the extraordinary capacities is highlighted.

Chapter 6 focuses on the first of the meditational powers, the creation of a body made of mind (*manomayakāya*). The chapter starts with a brief state of the art (§ 6.1) and introduces the canonical pericope that concerns the power (§ 6.2). Then, the interpretation of the compound '*manomaya*' is discussed (§ 6.2.1), as well as the translation and phrasing of the simile involving the reed (*muñja*) and the stalk (*isikā*) (§ 6.2.2). After these preliminary remarks on the canonical account, the Vedic background (with particular reference to the Upaniṣads) is analysed (§ 6.3) and, consequently, a comparison between the Buddhist and Upaniṣadic context has been made (§ 6.3.1). Thereupon, it is analysed how the Theravāda tradition developed the interpretation of the *manomayakāya* (§ 6.4). In particular, it has been proved that the interpretation of the Pāli term '*karaṇḍa*' as the 'slough of the snake' (in place of the natural meaning of 'basket') made by Buddhaghosa is not consistent with the use of *karaṇḍa* in the preceding and contemporary sources. In order to corroborate this point, reasons for this kind of interpretation and its probable textual origin have been presented. The diachronic study paved the way for some conclusive reflections (§ 6.4.8) regarding the value of the commentaries as hermeneutical tools to understand the canon, given the tendency to accumulate innovations over time. Finally, it is argued that this case study can demonstrate the useful possibility to overturn the prevailing paradigm that would see the commentaries as useful sources to understand the canon, whereas the use of the canon to evaluate the commentarial literature is equally a profitable approach.

Chapter 7 analyses the list of various psychophysical powers (*iddhividhā*) achieved by the Buddhist yogin. It starts by introducing the canonical pericope of the *iddhividhā* (§ 7.1) and some reasons for the translation of *iddhividhā* as 'a variety of psychophysical powers' are provided (§ 7.2). Thereafter, the involvement of the body made of mind (*manomayakāya*) in the execution of the extraordinary capacities has been analysed, benefitting from the evidence provided by the Vedic texts and discussing some scholarly

views on the topic (§ 7.3). Then, each individual psychophysical power in the canonical pericope has been analysed in a diachronic way from the canonical account up to the commentarial exegesis (§ 7.4). The analysis of the first *iddhi*, namely the multiplication of the body (*eko pi hutvā bahudhā hoti*), is particularly important for some results (§ 7.4.4). In this section, thanks to the evidence provided by the *Saddhammappakāsinī* – which shows that the exegetical literature is aware that it is providing additions – the way through which the commentaries and, more broadly speaking the exegesis, operate has been named the ‘interpretative accretion process’ (§ 7.4.4.1). Moreover, the Cūḷapanthaka’s story shows the existence, in the exegetical sources, of an early connection between the first *iddhi* and the creation of a body made of mind (*manomayakāya*) which seems to also be corroborated by the early canonical literature (§ 7.4.4.2).

Chapter 8 considers the group of powers known as *abhiññās* ‘higher knowledges’, comprising of the element of the divine ear (*dibbasotadhātu*) (§ 8.1), knowledge by comprehension of the minds of others (*cetopariyāñāṇa*) (§ 8.2), knowledge of recollection of former existences (*pubbenivāsānussatiñāṇa*) (§ 8.3), knowledge of the falling and arising of beings (*cutūpapātāñāṇa*) (§ 8.4). The analysis is conducted through the diachronic approach already applied for the *manomayakāya* and *iddhividhā*. It is worth noting that the *abhiññās* are systematically subjected to a kind of exegesis that involves the *cittavīthi* theory, but the implications will be analysed in the next Chapter (9). The chapter ends with a study on the similarities and differences in the use of the term ‘divine’ (Pāli: *dibba*; Sanskrit: *divya/daiva*) in both Buddhist and Upaniṣadic texts (§ 8.5). This last topic paves the way to the following chapter.

Chapter 9 makes use of what has been learnt from the study of the powers in the former chapters in order to evaluate their significance within the *Sāmaññaphalasutta*’s Buddhist path of liberation. At first, it is discussed whether or not the stages (at least the final ones) in the Buddhist path should be regarded as connected to each other. It seems that they can only bolster each other but can hardly be understood as necessary prerequisites given the existence of many versions of the Buddhist path in which one or more stages are omitted (§§ 9.1 and 9.2). However, the existence of a narrative climax focused on the body’s improvement in the *Sāmaññaphalasutta*’s account has been highlighted (§ 9.3). Furthermore, a bold hypothesis has been put forward, namely that at the stage of development of the divine element of ear, all the physical senses are divinised (§ 9.3.1). A divine body and divine senses are, indeed, necessary to attain higher knowledges, which are significant soteriological truths attained by a direct experience, rather than merely intellectual. The nature of the knowledge attained by the divine senses is analysed through the lens of the *cittavīthi*, which indicates that the divine senses operate without being obstructed by matter, highlighting the progressive liberation of the mind from the bounds of matter (§ 9.4). Finally, the relationship between the extraordinary capacities and the state of *jhāna* is considered, discussing the position endorsed by Eviatar Shulman (2014) on the matter (§ 9.4.1).

