

2 The Buddhist Path of Liberation: Context, Academic Studies and Interpretations

Index 2.1 Scholarly Treatments and Interpretations.

The concepts of *manomayakāya*, *iddhividhā* and the other *abhiññās* can occur either separated from each other in the Buddhist texts, or listed together in a sequence as part of the Buddhist path of liberation. The Nikāyas and Āgamas reflect a huge variety of schemes of this path and variations occur with reference to the number of stages involved.¹ Within the Pāli Nikāyas, a long exposition of the path is reported in the *Sāmaññaphalasutta* (D 2), and in an abbreviated and/or modified form in the subsequent eleven *suttas* (D 3-13). These *suttas*, together with the *Brahmajālasutta* (D 1), are part of a section of the *Dīghanikāya* called the *Sīlakkhandhavagga*, which contains the first thirteen *suttas*. Most of these *suttas* have a parallel within the Dharmaguptaka *Dīrghāgama*, which is extant in Chinese (T 1), and all of them have a parallel within the Mūlasarvāstivāda *Dīrghāgama*,² which is partly extant in Sanskrit.³

1 In this regard, see Gethin 2020.

2 Strictly speaking, it is not certain whether the Sanskrit *Dīrghāgama* should be regarded as belonging to the Sarvāstivāda or Mūlasarvāstivāda, and therefore, scholars have adopted different conventions in addressing this *corpus* of texts. Rupert Gethin (2020, 7-8) used ‘Sarvāstivāda’ as a term of convenience, whereas Jens-Uwe Hartmann (2014, 140, n. 5) suggested the use of (Mūla-)Sarvāstivāda to highlight the existence of an underlying ambiguity. Thus, my use of the term ‘Mūlasarvāstivāda’ is based on Bhikkhu Anālayo’s recent treatment of the issue (2023a, 73-96) and its adoption in some recent scholarship (e.g. DiSimone 2019, 11, n. 2; 2024).

3 Although significant parts of the Sanskrit *Dīrghāgama* have not reached us since portions of the preserved manuscripts were either destroyed or are still missing, the *sūtras* that constitute it are known due to the titles extant in some lists, called *uddānas*. For a detailed discussion of *uddānas*, see Hartmann 2004, 123-5.



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Table 2.1 This table is made in accordance with Hartmann, Wille 2014, 139-41; Anālayo 2014, 7-8; Bucknell 2014, 62-6; and, in particular, with Gethin 2020, 13

Theravāda Dīghanikāya	Dharmaguptaka Dīrghāgama (Cháng āhán jīng 長阿含經; T 1)	Mūlasarvāstivāda Dīrghāgama
<i>Silakkhandhavagga:</i> 13 suttas	Section 3: 10 jīng 經	<i>Śīlaskhandhanipāta:</i> 23 sūtras
1 Brahmajālasutta	21 Fàndòng jīng 梵動經	47 Brahmajālasūtra
2 Sāmaññaphalasutta	27 Shāménguǒ jīng 沙門果經	44 Rājasūtra
3 Ambaṭṭhasutta	20 Āmózhòu jīng 阿摩晝經	35 Ambaṭṭhasūtra
4 Soṇadaṇḍasutta	22 Zhǒngdé jīng 種德經	33 Śroṇatāṇḍyasūtra
5 Kūṭadantasutta	23 Jiùluótántóu jīng 究羅檀頭經	34 Kūṭatāṇḍyasūtra
6 Mahālisutta		32 Mahallisūtra
7 Jāliyasutta		30 Maṇḍīsasūtra I
8 Kassapasīhanādasutta	25 Luǒxíngfànzhì jīng 倮形梵志經	46 Kāśyapasūtra
9 Poṭṭhapādasutta	28 Bùzhàpólóu jīng 布吒婆樓經	36 Pṛṣṭhapālasūtra
10 Subhasutta		42 Śukasūtra
11 Kevaddhasutta	24 Jiāngù jīng 堅固經	29 Kaivartīsūtra
12 Lohiccasutta	29 Lùzhē jīng 露遮經	28 Lohityasūtra II
13 Tevijjasutta	26 Sānmíng jīng 三明經	45 Vāsiṣṭhasūtra
		25 Tridaṇḍīsūtra
		26 Piṅgalātreyasūtra
		27 Lohityasūtra I
		31 Maṇḍīsasūtra II
		37 Kāraṇavādīsūtra
		38 Pudgalasūtra
		39 Śrutasūtra
		40 Mahallasūtra
		41 Anyatamasūtra
		43 Jīvakasūtra

The *Sīlakkhandhavagga* of the *Dīghanikāya* shares its name with a parallel section within the Sanskrit Mūlasarvāstivāda *Dīrghāgama*, namely the *Śīlaskhandhanipāta*. However, the *Sīlakkhandhavagga* is the first section of the *Dīghanikāya* and begins with the *Brahmajālasutta*, whereas the *Śīlaskhandhanipāta* is the final section of the Sanskrit *Dīrghāgama* and reports the *Brahmajālasūtra* at the very end. As noted by Hartmann (2004, 122), it makes sense to suppose that the sections were reversed intentionally. The Chinese Dharmaguptaka *Dīrghāgama* seems to have four sections without names, the third of which parallels the *Sīlakkhandhavagga* and *Śīlaskhandhanipāta*.

Table 2.2 See Hartmann, Wille 2014, 139. Here, I have accepted the correction made by Anālayo (2014, 8-9, n. 13) on Hartmann, Wille (2014, 139), the same emendation seems to have also been adopted by Gethin (2020, 11). The number of *suttas/sūtras/jīng* 經 contained in each section is reported in brackets

Comparison of sections		
<i>Theravāda Dīghanikāya</i>	Dharmaguptaka <i>Dīrghāgama</i> (<i>Cháng āhán jīng</i> 長阿含經; T 1)	Mūlasarvāstivāda <i>Dīrghāgama</i>
<i>Sīlakkhandhavagga</i> (13)	Section 1 (4)	Ṣaṣṭrakāṇipāta (6)
Mahāvagga (10)	Section 2 (15)	Yuganipāta (18)
Pāṭikavagga (11)	Section 3 (10) parallel to <i>Sīlakkhandhavagga</i> and <i>Śīlaskhandhanipāta</i>	<i>Śīlaskhandhanipāta</i> (23)
	Section 4 (1)	

The long version of the Buddhist path of liberation has attracted the attention of scholars since the XIX and XX centuries, and many works were either dedicated to analysing, or at least touched upon this topic, until recent times.⁴ A full account on the path of liberation is provided in the *Dīghanikāya* within the *Sāmaññaphalasutta* since it is the first *sutta* in the *Sīlakkhandhavagga* in which the list occurs, whereas in the following *suttas* it is reported in an abbreviated form. The full account of the list, indeed, occurs in distinct texts within the Chinese and Sanskrit *Dīrghāgama* because the order of texts was arranged differently. Therefore, the first text in the Chinese Dharmaguptaka *Dīrghāgama* in which the list occurs is the text parallel to the Theravāda *Ambaṭṭhasutta*, namely the *Āmózhòu jīng* 阿摩書經 (T0001.01.0083c03-86c16);⁵ whereas in the Sanskrit Mūlasarvāstivāda *Dīrghāgama*, the full list appears in *Lohityasūtra I*, a parallel *sūtra* to the Theravāda *Lohiccasutta*.⁶ For the present research, the Theravāda

⁴ As early as the English translation of the *Dīghanikāya* made by T.W. Rhys Davids in 1899, the existence of a scheme repeated in many *suttas* within, but also outside of, the *Dīghanikāya* has been highlighted (Rhys Davids 1899, 59-61). The same path of liberation was used by Frauwallner ([1953] 1973, 129-35) to explain the Buddhist way of liberation within his influential *History of Indian Philosophy* (*Geschichte der indischen Philosophie*). See also Gethin 2020, 8-9. Notable further works, either on this topic or those that at least take it into account, are Schmithausen 1981; Griffiths 1983; Bucknell 1984; Meisig 1987; MacQueen 1988; Manné 1995; Yit 2004; Somaratne 2016; Shulman 2017; Gethin 2020; Shi 2021; Ben-David 2024.

⁵ See MacQueen 1988, 179-80; Yit 2004, 39; Gethin 2020, 12.

⁶ See Yit 2004, 45; Melzer 2010, 20; Gethin 2020, 14. The Sanskrit *Lohityasūtra I* has been edited by Choi (2015).

Sāmaññaphalasutta is the main reference, nevertheless some comparison with the Dharmaguptaka and Mūlasarvāstivāda traditions can help to clarify or scrutinise some points.⁷

The path of liberation within the *Sāmaññaphalasutta* runs from D I 62 to D I 85 and could be, in a partially arbitrary way, divided into twenty items or stages:⁸

Table 2.3 Stages of the Buddhist path of liberation

Buddhist path of liberation (D I 62-85)	
Stage	Description
1 <i>tathāgato loke uppajjati</i> (§ 40; D I 62)	Appearance of a Tathāgata in the world
2 <i>pabbajati</i> (§§ 41-2; D. I, 62-3)	A householder, having heard the doctrine, gains faith and converts to the life of Buddhist monks
3 <i>sīla-sampanna</i> (§§ 43-63; D I 63-70)	The monk lives in accordance with the Buddhist moral rules
4 <i>indriyesu guttadvāro</i> (§ 64; D I 70)	The monk guards his senses (the five physical senses plus the mind)
5 <i>sati-sampajañña</i> (§ 65; D I 70-1)	The monk is mindful and fully aware in all his activities
6 <i>santuṭṭha</i> (§ 66; D I 71)	The monk is content with his frugal life
7 <i>vivattaṃ senāsana bhajati</i> (§ 67; D I 71)	The monk finds a secluded dwelling
8 <i>pañca-nīvaraṇa-pahāna</i> (§§ 68-74; D I 71-3)	The monk abandons the five hindrances
9 <i>paṭhamajjhāna</i> (§§ 75-6; D I 73-4)	The monk attains the first meditative absorption
10 <i>dutiyajjhāna</i> (§§ 77-8; D I 74-5)	The monk attains the second meditative absorption
11 <i>tatiyajjhāna</i> (§§ 79-80; D I 75)	The monk attains the third meditative absorption
12 <i>catutthajjhāna</i> (§§ 81-2; D I 75-6)	The monk attains the fourth meditative absorption
13 <i>ñāṇa-dassana</i> (§§ 83-4; D I 76-7)	The monk discovers that the body is impermanent and that the consciousness (<i>viññāṇa</i>) is dependent on it
14 <i>manomayakāya</i> (§§ 85-6; D I 77)	The monk creates from the physical body another body made of mind

⁷ As I had not access to Choi 2015, the comparison with the Mūlasarvāstivāda tradition will be based on the Sanskrit version of the *Sāmaññaphalasutta* (= *Srāmaṇyaphalasūtra*) extant within the *Saṅghabhedavastu*, which reports a full account of the Buddhist path of liberation. As reported by Hartmann and Wille (2014, 142-3), the edition of the texts of the Sanskrit *Dirghāgama* is ongoing through Master or Doctoral theses, so they are not yet readily available.

⁸ Other kinds of classification were provided in Rhys Davids 1899, 57-9; Griffiths 1983, 52-3; Meisig 1987, 39; MacQueen 1988, 279-80; Manné 1995, 9-12; Yit 2004, 16-17; Gethin 2020, 16. My classification is in line with those also made by Yit and Gethin, although I have made some minor changes to terminology.

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Stage	Description
15 <i>iddhividhā</i> (§§ 87-8; D I 77-9)	The monk develops various kinds of psychophysical miraculous powers
16 <i>dibbasotadhātu</i> (§§ 89-90; D I 79)	The monk develops the divine ear and so he is able to hear sounds both human and divine, far or near
17 <i>cetopariyañāṇa</i> (§§ 91-2; D I 79-81)	The monk is able to comprehend the mind of other people
18 <i>pubbenivāsānussatiñāṇa</i> (§§ 93-4; D I 81-2)	The monk is able to remember his previous lives
19 <i>cutūpapātañāṇa</i> (§§ 95-6; D I 82-3)	The monk is able to observe the rebirth of beings in an inferior or superior plane of existence according to their <i>kamma</i>
20 <i>āsavakkhayañāṇa</i> (§§ 97-8; D I 83-5)	The monk knows all noxious influxes are destroyed and achieves liberation

According to the above subdivision of the Buddhist path of liberation, *manomayakāya*, *iddhividhā*, and the other *abhiññās* are the last seven stages (14-20) of the path.

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It is worth noting that among the scholars who have analysed some stages in greater detail, no one focused on the last stages of the path except Schmithausen (1981) who, however, still only considered the *āsavakkhayañāṇa*. Meisig (1987) provides a synoptic edition and translation of the *Sāmaññaphalasutta/Śrāmaṇyaphalasūtra* comparing five different versions of the texts as well as comparing the variants of the path (1987, 53-80). Griffiths analysed only seven stages in detail, namely 4, 5, 9-13 (1983, 60-88) making a comparison with other occurrences within the Nikāyas, whereas Yit analysed in detail the first eight stages (1-8), comparing them also with the Āgamas (2004, 93-266), and summarising the others (9-20) in an appendix (2004, 326-44). It may be possible that the last stages were disregarded due to a certain kind of preconception. For instance, regarding the last stages of the path concerning miraculous performances, Manné (1995, 21-3) refers to them by just quoting Lee Siegel's *Net of Magic: Wonders and Deceptions in India* (1991), and so addressing them as mere deceptions. Furthermore, comparing the *Dīghanikāya*'s exposition of the path with a version extant in the *Majjhimanikāya*, Manné seems to regard the latter as more authentic, solely on the basis of the fact that it involves fewer extraordinary activities, and that some of the few involved might be rationally explicable:

The M[a]jjhima[N]ikāya version lacks most of the paranormal or transpersonal powers [...] past life work forms an increasing part of the modern therapeutical experience in the work of therapists of different theoretical allegiances: knowing something about one's former lives seems to be useful for solving problems in the present life. This section

of the M[ajjhima]N[ikāya] is more plausible than the same section of the D[īgha]N[ikāya] version. (Manné 1995, 26-7; square brackets mine)⁹

Manné also believed that this stereotyped account of the path of liberation was “clearly propaganda. It is the advertisement for the Buddha’s method and its results, and means for final victory in debates” (1995, 29-30) and thereafter wondered: “[w]as the Buddha then cynical, offering magic and non-Buddhist states as part of his message just to convert followers? I think not. He knew his Teaching was hard to grasp and subtle” (1995, 30). The latter is a questionable assumption since there is no *a priori* reason to think that these kinds of magical and miraculous performances were not originally part of the Buddhist Doctrine given that the ancient Indian cultural *milieu* – see e.g. Vedic tradition, *Yogasūtra*, and Jain tradition – is full of these occurrences.¹⁰ Manné’s attempt to interpret the accounts related to the meditative powers as a mere propaganda is part of the many ongoing attempts of interpretation that, deliberately or not, dismiss the value and the importance of these powers. For instance, we find that Bhikkhu Anālayo wrote in more recent times that:

These instances leave little doubt that the ability to exercise supernatural powers is an integral part of early Buddhism. Nevertheless, such abilities are not seen as central to Buddhist practice. In fact, the supreme type of achievement among the six higher knowledges, *aññā* [sic., most likely *abhiññā*], is the gaining of full awakening, which is reckoned far superior to any supernatural feat. (Anālayo 2017a, 574-5; square brackets mine)

Even when fully recognised as early elements of Buddhism, extraordinary capacities are not considered key aspects. In the same vein, some scholars recognise the existence and widespread presence of these powers, and in an attempt to bestow to these accounts a certain degree of veracity, ended up relegating them to the mere sphere of imagination. In this regard, Rune Johansson suggested that “[s]ome of the supernatural forms of knowledge (*abhiññā*) may be understood as ideations interpreted as *real*” (1969, 48). A similar way of thinking – *mutatis mutandis* – seems to be expressed in more recent times by Steven Collins when, concerning the *pubbenivāsānussatiññā*, he writes that:

⁹ In more recent times, a similar position has been endorsed by Somaratne, who defines the *Majjhimanikāya*’s version as a ‘standard version’, and the *Dīghanikāya*’s one as an ‘extended version’ (2016, 359), sustaining a non-Buddhist status for some developments, such as the *iddhividhā* (2016, 372).

¹⁰ Similarly, Gethin argued that it is not implausible that the Buddha could have genuinely believed in the myth of creation within the *Aggaññasutta* (D 27) and other accounts regarded as mythological by modern scholars. He writes that: “there would seem to be no *a priori* reason why we should assume that an ascetic wandering the plains of northern India in the fifth century B.C.E. should share the same common sense and notions of plausibility that modern scholars do. Why should the Buddha not have genuinely thought that the world and society evolved after beings fell from the realm of radiance as described in the *Aggañña Sutta*, or that in a previous life he had lived as a great king in a city made of silver, gold, and other precious gems? The suggestion that he did think such things cannot just be dismissed as intrinsically historically implausible” (Gethin 2006, 66-7). Furthermore, Gethin (2001, 97-101) also highlights that in the Theravāda canonical literature the Buddha does not reject the practice of *iddhis per se*, but only their display.

From an external academic perspective, this whole account of the memory of former lives cannot be a phenomenological description of Buddhaghosa's or anyone else's experience of memory: it is rather an imaginative projection. (2009, 518)

Therefore, we might assume that either a negative preconception discouraged the undertaking of careful studies on these final stages of the path, or that the lack of studies resulted in unflattering interpretations. The most positive widespread interpretation ascribes the power to bring knowledge with a soteriological significance to some of the extraordinary capacities.¹¹ The *āsavakkhayañāṇa*'s soteriological significance is self-explanatory since this *abhiññā* is not only the most important, but also involves the comprehension of the four noble truths and the achievement of liberation.¹² The other two *abhiññās* whose soteriological significance has been extensively suggested are the *pubbenivāsānussatiñāṇa* and *cutūpapātañāṇa*, which, together with the *āsavakkhayañāṇa*, are referred to in some texts as the 'three knowledges' (*tisso vijjā*).¹³ Remembering one's own past existences and seeing the falling and arising of beings is a way to directly experience the existence of the round of rebirths called *saṃsāra* and the law of karma that influences this process and directs beings in higher or lower conditions.¹⁴ The *cetopariyañāṇa* has a less apparent soteriological significance, but as demonstrated by Bradley Clough ([2010] 2011, 419-23), it can nonetheless contribute some important knowledge (partly also soteriological) and can be a useful teaching tool of the Buddha to understand the mental dispositions of pupils.¹⁵ Concerning the *dibbasotadhātu* and *iddhividhā*, their importance and significance is limited, let alone the *manomayakāya*, which was carefully studied by very few scholars (see below § 6.1). In this regard, the words of Bradley Clough epitomise what I regard as an optimistic (but nonetheless still limited) view, concerning the *dibbasotadhātu* and *iddhividhā*, in which at least a sort of significance is recognised:

11 Notably, there is an attempt to interpret the final stages in the Buddhist path of the *Sāmaññaphalasutta* made by Radich (2007, 255-66) that would bestow a more active participation and importance to these powers in the process to attain liberation (it is especially interesting the involvement of the *manomayakāya*, which is often neglected). However, I am not acquainted with any other work that has seriously taken into account Radich's theory and, therefore, it is an interpretation *sui generis*.

12 Rhys Davids (1899, 59) states that only the *āsavakkhayañāṇa* is exclusively Buddhist among the fruits of the homeless life in the *Sāmaññaphalasutta*. A similar point of view is sustained by Demiéville: "[d]es six *abhiññā*, seule la sixième a un caractère proprement bouddhique" (1927, 290).

13 This categorisation will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

14 For more details, see below for § 8.3 concerning *pubbenivāsānussatiñāṇa* and § 8.4 concerning *cutūpapātañāṇa*. Demiéville (1927, 293) sustained that among the six *abhiññās* only the last three were considered *vijjās* because they were the only ones with a transcendent utility. Scholars, such as Jayatilke (1963, 466) and Kalupahana (1975, 106; 1987, 71), clearly gave prominence to the *pubbenivāsānussatiñāṇa* and *cutūpapātañāṇa* among the *abhiññās*. Radich (2007, 259-60) also argues that the practitioner, thanks to the meditative powers, directly knows the *saṃsāra*, while Fiordalis (2008, 116) suggests that the *pubbenivāsānussatiñāṇa* and *cutūpapātañāṇa* provide a confirmation of the Buddhist doctrine, and at the same time support the *āsavakkhayañāṇa*. Anālayo (2008, 91-3) suggests that these higher knowledges enable the practitioner to gain insight into the mechanism behind the operation of *saṃsāra*. Clough ([2010] 2011, 423-8; 2012, 95) also sustains the soteriological significance of these two *abhiññās*.

15 Some Fiordalis' works (2008; [2010] 2011) also deal at length with the telepathy known as *ādesanāpāṭihāriya*, highlighting as it is an important part of some narratives.

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. (Clough [2010] 2011, 432)

What Clough writes concerning the *dibbasotadhātu* is quite informative regarding the importance of the lack of understanding and full comprehension of a power in determining the role of that power within the Buddhist tradition:

Unlike the other *abhiññās*, its role and usage in Buddhist 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. (Clough [2010] 2011, 418-19)¹⁶

From the above quotations from Clough's article, we can deduce that at least the *iddhividhā* and *dibbasotadhātu* still lack a full comprehension and explanation satisfactory enough to effectively integrate these two powers with the other ones. There would be greater problems if we would consider the existence of the *manomayakāya* and the fact that it should have its *raison d'être* in the Buddhist path of liberation. Therefore, given that not only the study of these final stages was, for the most part, neglected, but their interpretation can reasonably be widely improved, the first aim of the present book will be to shed new light on these elements in the hope that this could offer insight on their significance into the path. The stages analysed are from the *manomayakāya* (number 14 in the above Table 2.3) to the *cutūpapātāñña* (number 19). The last stage (i.e. *āsavakkhayañña*) is not treated in the present book, although some useful material on it is gathered in Appendix 1. The analysis has benefited from previous studies concerning the path of liberation. Furthermore, the Vedic background will be analysed in order to better understand the context of formation. Among the Vedic texts, particular attention will be paid to the Upaniṣads, which are among the closest Vedic texts to the Buddhist canon, not only in terms of chronology but also in terms of the speculative arguments considered. For this reason, some preliminary remarks on the Vedic texts and their relationship with Buddhism will be discussed in the next chapter.

¹⁶ Clough writes a similar statement for the *iddhividhā*: “[t]hese supernormal powers [i.e. *iddhis*] 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” (Clough [2010] 2011, 415; square brackets mine). Concerning the *iddhividhā*, Somaratne even states that “there is nothing Buddhistic about this skill” (2016, 372).