
10 Conclusion

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10.1 Some General Thoughts on How Things Currently Stand, and How They Perhaps Should Stand, according to the Literary Evidence

This research, contrary to the usual approach to the Buddhist path of liberation, has analysed the final stages. A conventional approach to the Buddhist path of liberation would consist of dealing with the stages, starting from the first up until the last one. There is, of course, an evident benefit in doing so, namely that it is possible to analyse its gradual progress from the very beginning. What is less evident is that usually a researcher has a limited amount of time for pursuing research, and starting full of optimism from the very beginning, probably, as the time goes on, will start to abandon the idea of analysing all stages. The action of narrowing the research in order to respect a deadline is something that many researchers, if not all, have experienced at least once in their career. This fact highlights a risk for academic research in general, namely that if we all start from the same point, some topics will receive much more attention than others. Indeed, as noted at the beginning of the book (§ 2.1), studies on the Buddhist path of liberation mainly focused on the early stages, while extraordinary capacities are the final stages of the path and remained de facto neglected.

In the case of the extraordinary capacities, a further widespread bias might have affected the propensity among scholars to consider them as their object of research. As Rupert Gettin writes:

The attempt to marginalize the practice of miraculous powers in the earliest Buddhist texts must be considered a feature of Buddhist modernism, and related to the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century preoccupation



with recovering a historical Buddha congenial to the rationalist and ethical sensitivities of certain Buddhist apologists. (Gethin 2011, 223)

This, of course, is not only a problem that concerns Buddhist studies, but it seems to be shared with the broader field of Indian studies. For instance, it was noted by David G. White that the third chapter of the *Yogasūtra*, which deals with the supernatural powers of yogis, “has historically been the least studied portion of that text, in spite of the fact that it comprises over one fourth of the entire work” (2012, 61). The poor academic consideration of the extraordinary capacities is, indeed, not supported by the textual evidence.

In the case of Buddhism, we find that in the *Sāmaññaphalasutta* the *manomayakāya*, *iddhividhā* and the other *abhiññās* are even greater achievements than the *ñāṇa-dassana*, which is equated with the *vipassanā* by the commentarial literature.¹ It is therefore noteworthy that *vipassanā*, both as a subject of study and as a Buddhist practice, has certainly received more attention thus far. There is, indeed, not any *a priori* reason to believe that the extraordinary capacities were not an integrated part of early Buddhist thought. It seems rather that we overlook what we do not like. Eager to find signs of philosophy, rationalistic thought and similar sorts of things, we emphasise these topics to the detriment of others.² To some extent, this is a kind of appropriation of the Buddhist doctrine, not unlike the Western appropriation of Yoga. I wonder how many Yoga teachers in the West say to their pupils that they will achieve extraordinary capacities by practising Yoga. I would anticipate that not many do, despite that this is what the oldest text on Yoga states. The tendency, it seems to me, is that a tradition takes from another tradition what seems to fit its values and beliefs, without hurting the common-sense. Then, unsurprisingly, Yoga is nowadays recommended to stay fit, regardless of the higher purpose that the practice aims.³

Scholars are, of course, part of a tradition that may drive individuals to conform to its values, beliefs, etc., and then they may be subjected to the same biases that a tradition has towards another one. However, scholars interested in Buddhism, dealing with textual sources, should not fail to recognise the widespread presence of extraordinary capacities in the Buddhist texts. These marvellous abilities are as much real for Buddhists as anything else we can find in the canonical texts and exegetical literature. As something that really exists, they need a legal regulation. Therefore, the monastic code, the *Vinaya*, contains some rules to regulate the performance and the attitude towards them. Hence, in the *Cullavagga* section of the *Vinaya*, the Buddha forbids monks to exhibit and flaunt the superhuman miracle of powers in front of lay people (Vin II 112). On another occasion, it is stated that claiming to have experienced phenomena beyond [the average

1 *idha pana ñāṇa-dassanāya cittan ti idaṃ vipassanā-ñāṇaṃ ñāṇa-dassanan ti vuttaṃ* (Sv I 220).

2 “The promoters of the study of Indian philosophy often saw it as their job to emphasize the rational in Indian traditions against a Eurocentrism that saw rationality and philosophy mainly as an exclusively Western phenomenon” (Jacobsen 2012, 14).

3 My father, for example, was advised to practice Yoga and Pilates to relieve back pain, whereas we can hardly imagine ancient yogins suggesting such a practice primarily for this worldly purpose.

reach of] human beings (*uttari-manussa-dhamma*)⁴ when this is not true is an offence that results in expulsion from the monastic order (Vin III 91). As it has been analysed, the *manomayakāya*, *iddhividhā*, and the other *abhiññās* are an integrated part of the ideal type of Buddhist path of liberation in the *Sāmaññaphalasutta*. The exegetical literature has even handed down to us a method to develop them. Then, how can we claim that they are of little value? An old attempt to claim this was put forward by T.W. Rhys Davids, who seems to interpret the *Kevaddhasutta* (D 11) as a proof that the Buddha condemned the practice of wonders and miracles. However, more recent studies have demonstrated that the Buddha only argues against the displays of the *iddhis* as valuable means to arouse faith in people without confidence in the Buddhist doctrine because they would see them as mere tricks.⁵ The rejection of the exhibition of extraordinary capacities is only made in comparison with the exposition of the Doctrine; the latter should be certainly preferred. However, the extraordinary capacities are not rejected *in toto*. If we conceive the path of liberation as a transformative path, we cannot fail to note that in the *Sāmaññaphalasutta*, from a narrative point of view, there seems to be a gradual enhancement of the corporeality, which would result in a real divinisation of the body. This is not the final goal, but a part of the path. Perhaps, not a necessary part, considering the various accounts that omit many final stages, but nevertheless not a negative one. On the contrary, the extraordinary capacities may represent the gradual liberation from matter, applying the power of the mind trained in meditation, and resulting in the final liberation of the mind itself. Moreover, some of them can actually be actively involved in the process of liberation. Therefore, the first aim of the book concerned the in-depth study of these final stages of the Buddhist path of liberation. The terms of the analysis were dictated by the second aim, which concerned the development of these final stages over time. To pursue this research, a third aim has been involved, namely, to improve our knowledge concerning the Pāli commentarial literature, a pivotal *corpus* of texts for a diachronic study. We shall, at first, consider the results that pertain to the study of the exegesis and, later, the individual analysis of the *manomayakāya*, *iddhividhā* and other *abhiññās* will be presented. Finally,

4 This category, although it includes *iddhis* and *abhiññās*, does not concern them exclusively, as *uttari-manussa-dhammas* are defined as any meditation, including ordinary *jhana*. In this regard, also see Gethin 2001, 98-9.

5 In this regard, see Gethin 2001, 97-101 on Rhys Davids 1899, 272-84. On the *Kevaddhasutta*, see also Gómez 1977, 221-2; [2010] 2011, 517-18; Granoff 1996, 83-5; Fiordalis 2008, 31-4; [2010] 2011, 385-9; 2012, 100-1; Clough [2010] 2011, 413-14. It seems to me that since Gethin (2001, 98) highlighted that the use of the adjective 'rationalistic' adopted by Gómez is likely derived from Rhys Davids, and so brings with it a sort of bias, Fiordalis feels the need to defend the use of this adjective. In this regard, he writes that "[t]he passage does indeed seem to rationalize the wondrous in one sense, and that is by classifying it" ([2010] 2011, 385, n. 12) and also "[t]hus, Luis Gómez may be accurate in characterizing the *Kevaṭṭa-sutta* as 'rationalistic' in at least two senses. First, teaching the Dharma is valued over displays of superhuman power and telepathy, and second, the wondrous is embedded in a scholastic ratiocination on the various types of wonder and the different sources of superhuman power, which effectively reduces wonder to knowledge" (2012, 100-1). It seems to me that rather than being a 'rationalistic *sutta*', the *Kevaddhasutta* shows the pragmatic attitude of the Buddha. The Buddha's mission regarded the teaching of the Dhamma, so he undoubtedly values the teaching of the Dhamma over everything. The *Kevaddhasutta*, actually, not only suggests that the Buddha believed in the possibility of developing psychophysical powers and the mind-reading through meditation, but that similar powers could also be developed making use of a sort of esoteric science, namely through the spell *Gandhārī* (*gandhārī nāma vijjā*; D I 213), and through talismans (*maṇiko nāma vijjā*; D I 214). Therefore, it seems to me that the *sutta* is definitely not 'rationalistic' in our sense of the term.

the extraordinary capacities will be considered together as the final stages of the Buddhist path.

10.2 Pāli Commentaries and, Broadly Speaking, Theravāda Exegesis

The study of the Pāli commentaries ended to conflate in the broader study of the Theravāda exegesis, given that the exegetical process resulted to be an ongoing process. The observation of how commentaries and exegetical texts 'behave' in providing explanations led us to note the existence of a recurrent pattern. The exegetical texts tend to accumulate innovations and present them as further specifications in a quite systematic way. This process of accumulation of innovations and subsequent justification has been called the 'interpretative accretion process' (§ 7.4.4.1). This is certainly not the only way in which the commentaries work, but it is the preeminent one found so far in this study. Moreover, this pattern prompts us to wonder whether we can trust an interpretation that clearly introduces innovations. To be more specific, can we understand a concept X like X^{a+b+c} , where 'a', 'b' and 'c' are new information gradually introduced by the exegetical literature? Generally, it would be better to not accept anything blindly, even because the philological analysis of the exegetical interpretation of the term *karaṇḍa* (§ 6.4) proved that it is sometimes possible to reach a satisfactory evaluation of a given piece of exegesis. The quest of finding the right interpretation is naturally connected to the way in which we understand the Buddhist doctrines. Therefore, I suggested the necessity of adopting a 'philology of ideas' (§ 6.5) through which we can evaluate the original meaning and later developments of a canonical concept or idea through the analysis of both its past (e.g. Vedic background) and its future developments (exegesis). In fact, the exegesis of the term *karaṇḍa* is a case in which the commentarial interpretation was philologically forced, but in the present book there are other instances that would prove the value of the commentarial literature. The study of Cūḷapanthaka's story (§ 7.4.4.2), for example, would highlight a positive interaction between commentaries and canonical sources, in which the latter seem to confirm the version of the first. Still, other cases even seem to demonstrate that exegetical sources have handed down differing and competing interpretations. That is the case of the *ḍibbacakkhu*'s range of knowledge, which is different in the *Manorathapūraṇī* (*Āṅuttaranikāya-aṭṭhakathā*) and *Dhammapada-aṭṭhakathā* (§ 8.4.6). Therefore, we cannot but recognise the complexity of the exegetical literature and the necessity of dealing with exegetical material on a case-by-case basis.

Considering the value of some texts taken individually for the study of the Buddhist doctrine, we can see how commentaries such as the *Sumaṅgalavilāsinī* and *Saddhammapakāsinī* had an unsystematic and sporadic usefulness. The *Sumaṅgalavilāsinī* turned out to be of paramount importance for the study of the *manomayakāya*, but marginal for the study of the *iddhividhā* and other *abhiññās*. While the *Visuddhimagga* provided exegeses to the canonical formulae of the extraordinary capacities, the *Sumaṅgalavilāsinī* limited itself to commenting on the explanatory similes, often through a terminological explanation, that is, a word-by-word exegesis. In this context, the complementarity between the *Visuddhimagga* and *Sumaṅgalavilāsinī* is evident, although in the case of the *manomayakāya* it has

been observed that the *Sumaṅgalavilāsinī* provides not only complementary but also supplementary information. The *Saddhammapakāsinī* has proved to be largely a repetitive text, although occasionally it has provided fragments of original exegesis. The **Vimuttimaggā* also turned out to be a text of paramount importance, which should certainly be taken into consideration more by future research.

Furthermore, we might note how the exegetical literature is imbued with the Abhidhamma's expository style. In particular, a proper understanding of the Abhidhammic doctrine of the consciousness process (*cittavāṭhi*) was of a paramount importance in our analysis. The necessity to analyse an Abhidhammic topic in order to properly understand the exegetic accounts of the commentaries is a fact that should not be underestimated. The different layers of Buddhist literature are not separate entities but instead communicate with each other. The exegesis is not something that belongs exclusively to the commentarial literature, but it is possible to find it throughout the entire Pāli Buddhist literature. Therefore, studies on the Pāli commentarial literature should consider the sources that precede the commentaries in order to understand how the commentaries reach a certain kind of exegesis on a certain topic. Then, Rhys Davids' wish in editing the *Sumaṅgalavilāsinī* ([1886] 1968, VII; see above § 5.2) that the commentary would have brought new insight in the comprehension of the canonical *Dīghanikāya* can be overturned to some extent. The commentaries themselves need to be properly understood and this task starts from the early canonical accounts, continuing along the later literature up to the actual Pāli commentaries of the V century AD onwards. Commentaries cannot only be sources to investigate something else, they should also be regarded as an object of study. Then, I suggest consideration of the Pāli exegesis from a holistic point of view, in its diachronic development over time. The Pāli literature is a transmitted *corpus* of texts, a body of knowledge which is an expression of the Theravāda Buddhist culture. Then, in the words of the great evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins: "[c]ultural transmission is analogous to genetic transmission in that, although basically conservative, it can give rise to a form of evolution" ([1989] 2006, 189). This is, indeed, the way in which I think we should consider the Theravāda tradition, namely a basic conservative tradition that, nonetheless, for the very fact that it was (and still is) a living tradition, it was (and still is) subjected to evolution.

10.3 Extraordinary Capacities: *Manomayakāya*, *Iddhividhā* and Other *Abhiññās*

The analysis of the final stages of the path of liberation proved to be fruitful, also considering that they seem to be quite ancient elements. The comparison with the Vedic texts, in the case of the *manomayakāya*, has highlighted how Buddhist texts tacitly maintain some elements that characterise the notion of *manomaya*, especially in the Upaniṣads. The fact that the *manomayakāya* did not receive any elaboration from the first texts of the Abhidhamma suggests that it is an exogenous element. The *manomayakāya*, *iddhividhā* and other *abhiññās* receive greater exegetical attention only later, with the advent of the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*. Despite the fact that the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* belongs to the *Kuddhakanikāya*, it is possible to consider it as an Abhidhammic text, at least in spirit. Concerning

the diachronic development of the extraordinary capacities, it was decided to follow two slightly different lines of research. On the one hand there is the *manomayakāya*, and on the other hand the *iddhividhā* and other *abhiññās*.

10.3.1 *Manomayakāya*

In the case of the *manomayakāya*, it was possible to start from the Vedic background, given the existence of the term '*manomaya*' in the Vedic texts (especially the Upaniṣads), and then continue with the canon and its subsequent exegesis. What is *manomaya* in the Buddhist early canonical texts has strong similarities with its Upaniṣadic equivalent, while from the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* onward there is a clear departure from the Vedic texts. Particular attention was paid to the exegetic interpretation of the term *karaṇḍa*, which does not seem to be supported in any way by canonical sources and Upaniṣadic literature. This particular exegesis would seem to support a specific reading of the explanatory simile of the *manomayakāya* and, therefore, a peculiar interpretation of the extraction process. From the point of view of the third aim of the book, that is the study of commentarial literature, it was possible to notice how the exegesis was built through an accumulation of innovations, which appear to start from a given text, and influence the later texts' understanding of the topic commented upon. These slight changes guide the development and evolution of the *manomayakāya*, resulting in an exegetic interpretation that is difficult to infer from the canonical coeval and older texts. Therefore, in this case, it is clear that, at the present state of our knowledge, the study of extraordinary capacities and the study of commentarial literature cannot be separated. We cannot blindly accept the exegeses, but equally we cannot blindly disregard them. Commentaries contain some in-depth material concerning the *manomayakāya*, but the antiquity and reliability of that material is far from clear. In the case of the *manomayakāya*, for some aspects, the canonical context seems to be closer to the Vedic background than the Buddhist exegesis itself. Some results combined together may seem to indicate that the *manomayakāya* was a sort of 'state of being' or a subtler level of embodiment. Indeed, the very term '*manomaya*' could either mean 'made through the mind' or 'made of mind' or could maybe even mean both at the same time. The interpretation 'made of mind' would suggest that the materiality of which the new body is created is a subtler kind of materiality: a mental one. The canonical similes, could, indeed, indicate that the mental body is inside the physical body, compared with which is a more valuable part. Similarly, in Vedic texts there is a subtler mental embodiment that is *manomaya*, which has some apparent characteristics that still survive in Buddhism. It is centrally located within some lists, is luminous, is connected with the *ātman* (which is, in these contexts, a body or the trunk of the body). Moreover, it also seems that, in Buddhist texts, gods with bodies made of mind are not connected with the atmosphere (*antalikkha*) by chance, but rather this connection seems to be a residual influence from the Vedic cosmological view. Therefore, rather than being a peculiar Buddhist concept, the *manomayakāya* relates Buddhism to the ancient Indian religious environment and highlights the existence of some underlying background ideas which were never made explicit or fully explained. Therefore, the *manomayakāya* could represent evidence of a period when Buddhism was still in dialogue with its religious environment,

whereas, when the systematic organisation of the Abhidhamma started, priority was given to the tenets which were distinctively Buddhist, because the Abhidhamma is a work made by Buddhists for Buddhists. However, the case of Cūḷapanthaka's story (§ 7.4.4.2) reminds us that there could be some ancient aspects of the *manomayakāya* that are more properly Buddhist. This, of course, is something worthy of further analysis. The story of Cūḷapanthaka highlights that not only could there be a connection between different meditative powers, namely the first *iddhi* concerning the multiplication of the body and the body made of mind,⁶ but also that Buddhism might have incorporated the *manomayakāya* with a new facet unknown before. Therefore, future research on the *manomayakāya* is certainly desirable.

10.3.2 *Iddhividhā* and Other *Abhiññās*

Concerning the *iddhividhā* and other *abhiññās*, it was decided to proceed taking into consideration the method prescribed by the exegesis to develop these capacities. A thorough investigation on the Sanskrit terminological equivalents to the Pāli terms has not been pursued, although the comparison with the Vedic texts has, nevertheless, brought useful results for the study of these topics (see § 7.3; § 8.4.4; § 8.5).

Especially, from the *iddhividhā* onwards, the **Vimuttimagga* resulted to be a fundamental source for the diachronic reconstruction of the Theravāda exegesis. The first basic method to develop these psychophysical powers (found in the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*) is a set of instructions which fundamentally consist of the prescription of initially developing some pre-requisites. Consequently, a mental change (*āvajjana*) and a formal resolution (*adhiṭṭhāna*) should then occur. Although this method is the substratum of all exegeses, the various accounts are characterised by the differences in the smaller details. Starting from the **Vimuttimagga*, access into the state of *jhāna* and the act of emerging from it are included in the reports, and a similar narrative style is maintained in the *Visuddhimagga*. The latter text seems to also suggest a double access into the state of *jhāna* for some *iddhis*, a fact that could be due to the influence of some other exegetic accounts on the classical exegesis, which merged together during the reworking of Buddhaghosa, giving rise to this particular report. The analysis of the exegetical accounts showed that it is not always possible to reduce the interpretation to a single model. The presence of multiple and differing exegetical accounts makes the quest for an archetypical set of instructions quite an artificial task, in the sense that on the basis of the bare exegetical accounts, the archetypical set of instructions can sometimes emerge only if forced to do so. The exegetical accounts are sometimes so different that in order to find the underlying common bulk, we should assume in advance that it exists, because it is hard to infer from the plain analysis of the sources. At times, however, the exegeses provide almost the same method to develop the power, such as in the case of the third *iddhi* (§ 7.4.6). Therefore, it would seem reasonable to state that the exegetical understanding of these powers should be safely appreciated only on a case-by-case basis, paying

⁶ Concerning a possible connection between *iddhividhā* and *manomayakāya* from a Vedic point of view, see also § 7.3.

attention to similarities and differences, simultaneously balancing change and continuity.

Concerning the *abhiññās*, the same research methodology adopted for the *iddhividhā* was followed. Although, for the majority of the *abhiññās* there is a method to develop them which underpins all accounts over time; from a diachronic point of view, one cannot fail to note that there have been changes and additions. In some cases, it can be said that the exegesis was, in some ways, revolutionary. In the case of the *pubbenivāsānussatiñāṇa*, there is a sharp contrast between the method exposed in the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* and that exposed in the **Vimuttimaggā* and *Visuddhimaggā*. Regarding the *cetopariyañāṇa*, we cannot fail to note that the method is not exposed in the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*, but we must first wait for the testimony of the **Vimuttimaggā* and *Visuddhimaggā*.

The analysis of the method to develop each *abhiññā* provided interesting results, some of which also have important implications for the comprehension of the significance of such higher knowledges in the path of liberation. This is the case, for instance, of the *cetopariyañāṇa* (§ 8.2). Its exegesis presented a method to develop it that involved the use of the divine eye (*dibbacakkhu*) and a further glance into the canon highlighted that there is early evidence that sensory perception is involved in the performance of telepathy (viz. either natural or supernatural hearing or sight). This fact highlights the involvement of divine senses in the achievement of some higher knowledges, a kind of data that resulted to be useful in the assessment of the extraordinary capacities in the Buddhist path of liberation and in advancing the hypothesis that there is a process of divinisation of the body and senses, and that the latter are all already divinised during the stage of the development of the element of the divine ear (*dibbasotadhātu*). This is also corroborated by the analysis of the *cutūpapātañāṇa* (§ 8.4). This *abhiññā* is also referred to as *dibbacakkhu*, but this latter term has proved to be a metonymic use and the *dibbacakkhu* resulted to be the mere instrument through which such higher knowledge is attained.

Some other results of the study of the *abhiññās* highlight the complexity of the exegetical literature, to which we can only but surrender. I mean that sometimes the exegetical accounts display such a degree of change that we can only admit that we are facing either diverging or alternative interpretations and that some additions occurred over time. The study of the *pubbenivāsānussatiñāṇa* (§ 8.3) has been a good example of the aforementioned possibilities. Not only does the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* provide a different exegesis from that of the **Vimuttimaggā* and *Visuddhimaggā*, but the *Visuddhimaggā* makes extensive reference to two ways of remembering (viz. *khandhapaṭipāṭi* 'succession of aggregates' and *cutipatisandhi* 'death-rebirth'). It is difficult to establish whether or not these two ways of remembering were already formulated in the **Vimuttimaggā*, but even if so, the *Visuddhimaggā* amply relies on these categories in a way unattested before. The only *raison d'être* for the existence of the *khandhapaṭipāṭi* and *cutipatisandhi* dichotomy resulted to be that of establishing distinctions between the various practitioners, especially between the Buddhist ones and the followers of other schools.

Finally, we may note that the exegetical explanations, through the perspective of the Abhidhamma method of analysis, may enrich our comprehension of Buddhism as a whole and provide fresh insights on the role of meditation in the path of liberation. The exegesis of the first *iddhi*,

the multiplication of the body (§ 7.4.4), and that of the element of the divine ear (*dibbasotadhātu*) (§§ 8.1.2 and 8.1.3) would highlight through the lens of the consciousness process (*cittavīthi*) doctrine that in the process of performing *iddhis* and *abhiññās* the meditator gets in touch with the divine realm of the *rūpāvacara*. The latter is also the realm in which the meditator abides in the state of *jhāna* and that, in its corresponding cosmological sphere (i.e. *rūpadhātu*), hosts the gods whom have a body made of mind (*manomayakāya*). It seems, indeed, that the whole process aims to bring to our world the divine power existing in some rarefied realms of existence, which are over our sense-sphere of existence (*kāmāvacara* and *kāmadhātu*, respectively from a psychological and cosmological perspective). From an Abhidhammic point of view, the marvellous performances resemble the entrance in the state of *jhāna*, although strictly speaking are not performed in the state of the fourth *jhāna*, which occurs before as a sort of pre-requisite (see § 9.4.1). The state in which the meditator performs the extraordinary capacities seems indeed to be quite similar, although not identical, to the *jhāna* state. Therefore, this *jhāna*-like state may suggest that the extraordinary capacities could be interpreted as some sort of tangible and concrete jhānic applications. In this case, we see how the inner psychological world is connected with the broader cosmological dimension and, at the same time, brings effects in the real world of the everyday experience. There is an interaction between the microcosm (psyche) and macrocosm (cosmos), and this interaction is possible through meditation. In that sense, we can say that meditation mediates different levels of existence, and the reality is both determined by the outside and objective world as well as by the inner world. A mind trained in meditation can access inner psychological states as well as higher cosmological realms. This process is transformative, in the sense that can affect the physical body, and, therefore, a mental body which resembles that one of the gods has been created, many psychophysical feats can be performed and divine senses are attained.

10.4 Extraordinary Capacities as Final Stages of the Buddhist Path

In Chapter 9, the *manomayakāya*, *iddhividhā*, and the other *abhiññās* were considered within the Buddhist path, investigating their function and meaning. In this regard, the presence of a narrative climax has been identified which would seem to indicate a progressive divinisation of the body. A speculative hypothesis has been put forward that would see the divine eye created simultaneously with the divine ear (and, perhaps, with the other divine senses). In other words, it has been hypothesised that the stage in which the divine ear is developed, actually corresponds to the divinisation of all the physical senses, including also the eye. In fact, there was also an extensive involvement of the sensory perception for the other analysed *abhiññās*. This perception resulted to be extraordinary, and has therefore often been conveyed by the so-called divine senses. What makes the senses divine is the mind, which is the only one sense that is connected with a power capable of affecting reality (§ 8.5). Hence, the *manomayakāya*, being a mental body, is also, by extension, divine. The mind is what is divine in humankind, and it can divinise the body and so also the senses, the means of knowledge. If once mankind turns its eyes to the heavens and

attributes to what is up there, what is wonderful in the world and in itself in Buddhism, the attention is turned inside. Mankind finds within itself the transformative force that is not only able to interact with the outside world but is also capable of transforming it. The mind has this transformative power, through which it can free itself. Now, I hope the reader would allow me an impromptu:

Buddhism is thus a tale of redemption,
where a human being can train their mind to free itself,
passing from protagonist to spectator,
free is the mind and those who helped it to free itself.

This reading of the Buddhist path of liberation would suggest that it is quite unrealistic to regard Buddhism as only a rationalist body of practices and ideas. Rather, it seems that at least part of the tradition retains a connection with forces beyond the ordinary world and experience and conceived the path of liberation as a process of interactions with these forces. The meditator, through meditation, establishes a connection with the higher realms; this contact is transformative, and the physical and limited body is transformed, as well as the senses. The meditator's own experience radically changes and, it could be said, they are then able to know things *on earth as it is in heaven*. Therefore, experience takes on a preeminent role in the path of liberation, and this kind of experience is extraordinary and related to the meditative practice. This can lead us to a more balanced understanding which would more seriously consider the mystical or magical aspects of the Buddhist doctrine.

Finally, we cannot but recognise the narratological crescendo of the Buddhist path. The meditator, once they have developed a divine body, gains a sort of freedom of movement and mastery over the matter. They are able to know everything in the universe through divine senses, know the minds of others, and even know things from the past. It is like the meditator is able to expand themselves spatially and temporally into the universe, reaching the apex of a cosmological dimension. But, in the end, they return back to their own mind, knowing that they are free from the noxious influxes: "During liberation, there is the knowledge '[The mind] is liberated'" (*vimuttasmim vimuttam iti ñāṇam hoti*; D I 84). The text passes from a cosmic to a more intimate and private dimension, replacing the opulent list of exceptional feats with a more personal experience. The latter, if compared with the astonishing miraculous feats, almost conveys a sense of normality, as it does not seem to be anything special, although according to Buddhists it is the best among the fruits of the ascetic life. Therefore, I want to conclude with a pertinent verse from Lucio Dalla, a polymath songwriter born in Bologna (like me) on the 4th of March (like me) in 1943, who used to sing these words:

But the exceptional feat, believe me,
is to be normal.
Ma l'impresa eccezionale, dammi retta,
è essere normale
(Lucio Dalla, *Disperato erotico stomp*)