

# Progress and Free Will: On the Buddhist Concept of “Time” and Its Possibilities for Modernity

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## Abstract

An even only cursory glance at the way Buddhism is experienced, interpreted, and lived in the contemporary world—both Western and Oriental—reveals Buddhism’s multiple “modern faces”. This paper does not intend to describe all or even a selected group of these many faces, but attempts to contribute to our understanding of how peculiar developments within Buddhist philosophy have made it possible that such a variety of “Buddhist modernities” could develop. It is shown that it is the peculiar Buddhist interpretation of the concept of time that has provided the basis on which the various modern features of Buddhism could build, because the Buddhist interpretation of time contains an aspect of progress and free will. It is suggested that these two aspects increased the prominence given to the individual adept in the Mahāyāna. The article then claims that it precisely are the ideas of rationality, progress and individualism that are also characteristic for the modern world that contain the possibility for Buddhism to develop its multitude of modern faces.

**Keywords:** time, karmic retribution, knowledge, meditation, Buddhist modernity

## Izvleček

Že bežen pogled na to, kako ljudje v sodobnem svetu (tako na Zahodu kot na Vzhodu) doživljajo, interpretirajo in tolmačijo budizem, razkrije, da so zanj značilni številni »obrazj sodobnosti«. V članku ne bom popisoval vseh ali le izbranih vidikov teh različnih obrazov, temveč bom poskušal osvetliti, kako so specifične spremembe znotraj budistične filozofije omogočile, da je nastalo toliko različnih »budističnih sodobnosti«. Zagovarjal bom trditev, da je specifična budistična interpretacija časa postavila pomembne temelje za razvoj številnih značilnosti sodobnega budizma, saj vsebuje dimenziji napredka in svobodne volje, ki sta postali še posebej pomembni v budizmu *mahāyāna*. Dokazoval bom, da so za sodobni svet značilne prav ideje o racionalnosti, napredku in individualizmu, ki budizmu dopuščajo, da razvije množico sodobnih obrazov.

**Ključne besede:** čas, karmična retribucija, vednost, meditacija, budistična sodobnost

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## Introduction

Undertaking an evaluation of Buddhism in contemporary societies is a complex matter, as it immediately raises a series of questions: Which particular society is to be the focus of investigation? Which aspect of contemporaneity is to be discussed? Modernity for a Buddhist lay follower, e.g., will be of a different quality than it is for a monk who lives in the confines of his monastery. These modernities will again have a different meaning than those embraced by, e.g., a female Buddhist devotee who is familiar with the “modern” concepts of gender equality. Given, further, that “(a) sense of time is fundamental to human thought to the extent that the past must be invoked in order to establish any present ideology, even one that involves a discounting of the past. All ideologies are fundamentally descriptions not of a present state, but of a past history” (Kemp 1992, 106) each of these Buddhist modernities will itself also be influenced by the particular history of Buddhism in the region under investigation, or by the mutual influence different social and political structures and Buddhism may have had on each other.

As modern life—the contemporary *condition humaine*—in India is different from modern life in China, or in Japan, and as also American modernity arguably differs from German modernity or from Slovenian modernity, discussing Buddhism as a bridge between Asia and Europe becomes an even more complex issue. Which Western Buddhism is compared with which Asian version? As Buddhism has also undergone major transformations in the various regions of Asia, and as the concept of “original Buddhism” is merely a 19th century European construct, created in a Protestant, Darwinian, and Romantic context (See Maes 2015, 11–36; Lopez 2008, 5–37, 154–91; McMahan 2008, 7–8).<sup>1</sup> defining “Western Buddhism” or “modern Buddhism” as against a presumably authentic Indian Buddhism is a futile undertaking. Not only is there no such thing as an “original” Buddhism with which its modern Western versions could be compared, neither is there an overall modern Asian prototypical Buddhism. Contemporaneity in Asia has, in the past two centuries, seen the influences of European colonization, which have changed the political structures that were associated with Buddhism; confrontation with Western religions and ideologies has stimulated Buddhist activism; it has, in some cases, made Buddhists participants in civil war, or has stifled any Buddhist activity; capitalism has changed traditional value-structures; and also such “modern” concepts as democracy, egalitarianism, and secularization have had a great impact on Buddhism. In the

1 This can also be inferred from, e.g., Sir Edwin Arnold’s 1879 *The Light of Asia*, a poem on the life of the Buddha that portrays the Buddha in a way that is akin to Jesus. See Harvey (2013, 420).

contemporary digital age, traditional Buddhist cultures have easily transgressed their regional confines, and a whole new “Buddhist world” has emerged.<sup>2</sup>

And yet, we can rightfully speak of “modern Buddhism”, “Western Buddhism”, “European Buddhism”, “American Buddhism”, etc. In the introduction to his work *Deutsche Buddhisten. Geschichte und Gemeinschaften*, Martin Baumann (1992, 15) correctly states that the Europeanization of Buddhism comprises the acceptance of Western cultural elements by Buddhist interpreters and monastic communities, and that despite the fact that this development has changed the face of Buddhism, elements we can easily define as “Buddhist” have been maintained. It is precisely because there is commonality of Buddhist concepts that the “other” can be qualified as “Western”, “European”, or “American”.

It is to one of these commonalities that the following pages are devoted: the concept time. It will be shown that the development in the interpretation of the Buddhist concept time has made it possible for the Buddhist doctrine to have become adaptable to a multitude of simultaneous modernities—be they Asian or European, be they of a moral, ethical, religious, social, or still other nature.

### “*Sarvam asti*”: Everything Exists

Confronted with the vicissitudes of life, human beings have always and everywhere tried to understand their present condition and have tried to give their contemporary life sense and meaning. This intellectual process is intrinsically related to the way a human being perceives time. Time can be interpreted as either having a dependent or independent existence, and as being either finite or infinite. That is, human beings can see themselves as traversing through an either finite or infinite but independently existing time, or they can see time as inherent in themselves. The first position implies that time has an absolute quality, i.e., time does not exist relative to a human being. The disappearance of a human being, i.e. the disappearance of one’s personal allotment of time, has no impact on the absolute time that continues to either infinitely or finitely exist. Human beings cannot therefore have a lasting effect on time. The second position implies that time exists relatively to human beings. One’s personal allotment of time, that is, the relative time, disappears together with the passing away of a human being. As time exists within oneself, time is finite by definition.<sup>3</sup>

2 For a detailed analysis of all these phenomena: see Harvey (2013, 376–418).

3 In Western philosophy, the absolute concept of time was formulated by Isaac Newton in his *Philosophiæ Naturalis Principia Mathematica*, published in 1687, and the relative concept of time was formulated by Immanuel Kant in the part “Transcendental Aesthetic” of his *Critique of Pure Reason*, published in 1787. For some further theoretical reflections on the topic: see Li and Dessein (2015, 157–8, 172–3).

The Buddhist concept of *karman*, i.e., the concept that the present lifetime is the retribution (*vipāka*) of deeds in a former lifetime, is a particular interpretation of the relationship between discrete factors (*dharma*), including human beings, and time. While Buddhism inherited the concept of *karman* from the Indian tradition within which it developed, and while all Buddhists, from the outset, accepted that the dynamics of *karman* are responsible for their contemporary life and also determine future rebirth, it was especially the Sarvāstivādins, whose development as a distinct philosophical group has been suggested to date back to the 2nd and 1st centuries BCE<sup>4</sup>, who philosophically developed the relation between discrete factors and time, whence their name.<sup>5</sup> The Sarvāstivādins' (main) claim (*vāda*) that everything (*sarva*) exists (*asti*) is, actually, a claim that the discrete factors exist in three distinct periods of time. This position is logically inferred from the dynamics of *karman* as expressed in the concept of "conditioned production" (*pratītyasamutpāda*), the workings of causality, whereby a present discrete factor is the result of former causes and is, in its turn, the cause of a future discrete factor. The *\*Samyuktābhidharmahṛdaya*, a work written in Gandhāra in the 4th century CE by the Sarvāstivādin Dharmatrāta and which is extant in a Chinese translation by Saṃghavarman of 434 CE, describes this process as follows:

If there were no past and future, then there would be no present period of time; if there were no present period of time, there would also be no conditioned factors (*saṃskṛta dharma*). That is why there are the three periods of time (*trikāla*). Do not state that this is wrong. When stating that what is remote is past and that what will exist is future and (that it therefore) does not exist, and that there is only the present, this is not correct. Why? Because there is retribution (*vipāka*) of action. The World-honored One said: "There is action and there is retribution". It is not the case that action and retribution are both present. When action is present, retribution should be known as future; when retribution is present, action should be known as already past. (T.28.1552, 963b5–12)

We can here recall that the *\*Samayabhedoparacanacakra*, a work attributed to a certain Vasumitra<sup>6</sup> explains that the name "Hetuvādin" (causalists) is another name

4 Hirakawa (1974, 143) suggests the 2nd century BCE; Shizutani (1978, 48 ff.) suggests the 1st century BCE.

5 Bronkhorst (2011, 116–7) remarks that "Brahmanical religion allowed various sometimes mutually contradictory points of view with regard to one's future destiny to coexist, and some of the most conservative Brahmins, the Mīmāṃsakas, had no place for the theory of karma right up to the middle of the first millennium CE and beyond".

6 According to Bareau (1950, 70), this work was compiled between the 3rd and the 1st centuries BCE and the 1st century CE. Lamotte (1958, 301–2) dates Vasumitra 400 years after the Bud-

for the Sarvāstivādins (T.49.2033, 22c9–10.). Bhavya, a 6th century Mādhyamika (see Bareau 1954, 231–2), explains the causalist principle as follows: “What has been produced (*utpanna*), what is being produced (*utpadyamāna*), and what is to be produced (*utpattavya*) is all supplied with causes (*sahetuka*).”<sup>7</sup>

This basic description of the concept of dependent origination would, as mentioned above, be accepted by all Buddhist schools. It therefore is indeed likely that it was only later that peculiar philosophical explanations of how the concept of dependent origination technically relates to the concept of time were formulated, and that it especially was the Sarvāstivādins who were responsible for this development.

The above quotations show an intricate connection between the dynamic working of *karman* (through conditioned production (*pratītyasamutpāda*)) and the time concept (past, present, and future). A logical result of this connection has been that, for the Sarvāstivādins at least, time is none other than the activity of discrete factors. As stated by Kenneth K. Inada (1974, 173): “(E)xperiential events do not take place or flow in time. Rather, it would be more appropriate to say that events flow as time”. Time is inherent in the discrete factors that therefore must have a continuous essence (*dravya*), stretching from the past, over the present, to the future. In this sense, the “temporality” of discrete factors is superimposed on them by a subjective observer.<sup>8</sup> (See Dhammajoti 2009, 117–8)

The importance of this philosophical development notwithstanding, the technical question of precisely how karmic activity and time are connected, i.e., the question *how* precisely time manifests itself in the discrete factors, became heavily debated between the Kāśmīri Vaibhāṣikas and the non-Vaibhāṣika Sarvāstivāda sugroups of Bactria and Gandhāra. As just mentioned, the “temporality” of discrete factors is superimposed on the latter by a subjective observer. That is to say, an observer sees discrete factors that have a continuous essence coming into existence, after which their continuance in the present is observed, as well as their disappearance in time once their allotted period of time has passed. In Buddhist vocabulary,

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dha’s *parinirvāṇa*. Masuda (1925, 8) situates Vasumitra in the 1st century CE. Cousins (1991, 28) proposes a 1st to 4th century CE date for Vasumitra. There are three Chinese versions of this text: *Yibuzong lun lun* (T.49.2031), *Shiba bu lun* (T.49.2032), and *Buzhiyi lun* (T.49.2033). On the dates of these three versions: see Masuda (1925, 5–6), Lamotte (1958, 302) and Wang (1994, 171, 175–6).

7 For Bhavya’s explanation: see Rockhill (1884, 182), Walleser (1927, 78–9), Bareau (1956, 168).

8 Dux (1989, 37) states that “When we say ‘now’, we do not only denote the actual moment of our own existence; ‘now’ is the expression of the situation of the universe in the logical second of its most advanced duration, the moment of its transition in the dynamic organization that encompasses everything and everyone that is simultaneous with ourselves”.

this is expressed in the concept of the “characteristic marks of the conditioned” (*saṃskṛta lakṣaṇa*): birth (*utpāda*), change in continuance (*sthityanyathātva*), and passing away (*vyaya*).<sup>9</sup>

Between the Vaibhāṣikas and the non-Vaibhāṣikas, discussion arose whether or not these “characteristic marks of the conditioned” exist as discrete factors themselves. This discussion had major ramifications for the way the functioning of time was perceived. From the [*\*Abhidharmamahā*] *vibhāṣā*[śāstra], the major work of the Kāśmīri Vaibhāṣikas (dated roughly somewhere around the end of the 1st to the end of the 2nd century CE)<sup>10</sup> we know that the Vaibhāṣikas saw the characteristic marks as discrete factors in their own right.<sup>11</sup> If the characteristic marks exist as discrete factors in their own right, the question is then how they relate to the factor with respect to which they, as discrete factors, have a function, for such a relation must exist. If there were no relation between the characteristic marks and the specific discrete factors they characterize, all factors would arise or disappear simultaneously because the presence of the characteristic marks as discrete factors is true with respect to all possible discrete entities. If, however, the characteristic marks of the conditioned *do not* exist as discrete entities but equally exist with respect to a specific discrete factor, which is the position held by the non-Vaibhāṣika Sarvāstivādins, the question then is why the characteristic marks birth, change in continuance, and passing away do not function simultaneously with respect to the discrete factor they characterize, that is, why does a discrete factor not disappear at the very moment it arises? The non-Vaibhāṣikas’ answer to the above question can be read in Vasubandhu’s *Abhidharmakośa*:

- 9 Sinha (1983, 85) remarks that “It is not the reality of past, present, and future as three points of time that is posited by *Mahāvibhāṣā*; rather, it is the reality of things or *dharmas* as past, present, and future that is admitted here”. For a detailed study of this problem: see Dessein (2007) and Dessein (2011).
- 10 On the different traditions on the date of the compilation of this work: see Nakamura (1996, 107) and Willemen, Dessein and Cox (1998, 119, 231–2). The Chinese version of this work was done by Xuanzang between 656 and 659 CE. (See T.55.2154, 557a18–19 and 320c12–16)
- 11 This implies that these “primary” characteristic marks (*mūlalakṣaṇa*) must be, in turn, characterized by further characteristic marks, the so-called secondary marks (*anulakṣaṇa*). It is clear that this standpoint leads to an infinite regression, as these secondary marks should logically be discrete factors in their own right and have further characteristic marks as well. When their opponents pointed to this infinite regress, the Vaibhāṣikas answered that the primary birth gives rise to the actual factor, and further leads to continuance, change and passing away, and that it also induces birth of birth, continuance of continuance, change of change, and passing away of passing away. Birth of birth, they claimed, only gives rise to primary birth. The next question for the Vaibhāṣikas obviously then was to explain how the birth of birth can bring forth birth when it itself arises through birth. (See T.27.1545, 200c15–28)



The World-honored One (...) manifested that it is the essence of a stream of conditioned force that is (designated as) conditioned and as having the nature of having arisen through conditions. (...) He did not manifest that all three characteristic marks are present in one (separate) *kṣaṇa* (instant) of a conditioned force.<sup>12</sup> (T.29.1558, 27c2–4)

When the characteristic marks are absent in one separate instant, but are present in succession, it is logically “birth” that brings a discrete factor into existence. “Birth” is that instant in the subjectively perceived stream of successive moments in which a discrete factor acquires its essence (*dravya*). This acquisition of the essence is the result of conditioned arising, that is, of the combination of causes (*hetu*) and conditions (*pratyaya*) through former karmic activity. For the Vaibhāṣikas, this position is untenable because when a factor acquires its essence through “birth”, then a change in characteristic marks would imply a change in essence. A given discrete factor would become a different discrete factor along with the succession of the characteristic marks birth, continuance, change, and passing away. They therefore differentiated a latent “capability” (*sāmarthya*) and an active state (*kāritra*) of the characteristic marks. This solution is related to their acknowledgement that characteristic marks are discrete factors themselves. Any single characteristic mark has the ability to change from a latent state to an active state while continuously existing as an independent discrete factor, simultaneously with the discrete factor on which they have an effect (See T.27:1545, 200a9–b5, 393a15–16). A logical result of this interpretation is that it is no longer the characteristic mark birth that brings a discrete factor into existence, but the “becoming active” of birth. A next question to be solved was the following: When the characteristic marks exist as discrete factors themselves, how then does birth become active with respect to a particular discrete factor, without thereby eliminating the relation between characteristic marks and the discrete factor on which they have an effect, i.e., avoiding the possibility that all discrete factors arise and disappear simultaneously? The Vaibhāṣikas found the solution to this problem in the concept of conditioned production: Birth needs a particular assemblage of causes and conditions to become active (See T.29:1562, 409a28–b1 and 409b11–13). These causes and conditions are a karmic continuation with respect to a particular discrete factor.

That karmic activity in the present lifetime will, through the principle of conditioned production, have its effect on a future life, brings us to the peculiar position that the Buddhist cycle of rebirth (*saṃsāra*)—a cyclic time concept—contains an aspect of progress: each beginning of a new cycle through karmic retribution is not a return

12 The lifetime of Vasubandhu remains an object of scholarly discussion, with arguments for either a 4th century or a 5th century lifetime.

to a “timeless origin”.<sup>13</sup> Karmic “progress”, it should be noted, is also not determinist. For most Buddhist schools, the result of *karman* is morally indeterminate (*avyākṛta*), which means that karmic retribution does not determine fortune and misfortune: the Buddhist cycle of rebirth leaves space for free decision (See Halbfass 2000, 116–8; Bayer 2010, 50–51). Günter Dux (1989, 236) remarked that, as a rule, life is “loaded” and returns back to the origin. The origin, however, is twofold: the origin that is timeless and the origin that adjusts to becoming. As long as the soul is loaded, it cannot return to the timeless origin, but only to the origin of becoming. Only those who have attained wisdom that is free from any bond to the world can return to the timeless origin. In this process, one does not destroy time, but liberates oneself from time. Applying this to Buddhism, while the earlier, non-Vaibhāṣika position saw time as inherent in the discrete factors, which implies that time is relative and stops with the passing away of an individual human being, thus making a return to a “timeless origin” impossible, the Vaibhāṣikas’ distinction between a passive state and an active state of the characteristic marks created the following “eschatological” possibility: when a Buddhist adept, through pursuing the middle mode of progress (*madhyamā pratīpad*), attains Nirvāṇa, their relative time may have stopped, but the absolute time will continue to latently exist. They therefore can return to the “timeless origin”. With this time perspective, Buddhism, one could claim, stands in between a strict cyclical concept of time and a linear one that was, for Europe, developed as a result of the Jewish-Christian eschatology, and was introduced by Augustine (354–430).<sup>14</sup> I will return to this when discussing Buddhism in the contemporary European world.

## The “Powers of Cognition” and the Idea of Individual Progress

Above, we have stated that the dynamics of dependent origination leave the place open for free will: whether or not a human being follows the Buddhist path of liberation that will, in the end, enable him to return to the “timeless origin”, is his free decision.<sup>15</sup> It is, moreover, because the cyclic time concept of Buddhism contains an idea of progress that it is possible to gradually shake off all bonds to the world

13 This time concept differs from the traditional Chinese cyclic time concept that lacks this aspect of progress. See Bauer (2006, 37–8).

14 Taking the birth of Christ as the focal point of history, Augustine’s linear time model was divided into three time periods: the period from Adam to Moses, the period from Moses to the birth of Christ, and the period from Christ to the end of the world. The resurrection of Christ is the endpoint of this linear interpretation of time. For the development of the time concept in Europe see Dux (1989, 327–31).

15 Also in this respect, Buddhism differs from the Christian doctrine. For Christianity, the fact that all human beings are created by God, makes them part of a divine plan. See Göller and Mittag (2008, 28, 31), who characterize Augustine’s view of history as the transformation of the history of a clan, people, or tribe into the history of mankind.



and liberate oneself from time. The importance of these concepts is visible in the description of the Buddhist path to liberation as it is presented in the Sarvāstivāda philosophical works. While progressing on the path to liberation, the practitioner gains and practices different forms of knowledge and forms of meditative attainment. On the path to liberation, there thus is an interplay between knowledge and meditative attainment, i.e., between the cognitive and the meditative.<sup>16</sup>

The path to liberation consists of a “path of vision” (*darśanamārga*) and a “path of spiritual practice” (*bhāvanāmārga*). The distinction between these two kinds of path is based on the way passions (*anuśaya*) are annihilated, i.e., through vision and repeated spiritual practice, respectively. There is a basic set of ten passions that are simultaneously linked to the three Buddhist realms of existence (the sensual realm (*kāmadhātu*), the realm of form (*rūpadhātu*), and the realm of formlessness (*ārūpyadhātu*)) and that are to be partly annihilated through vision (*darśanaprahātavya*) of the four noble truths and partly through repeated spiritual practice (*bhāvanāprahātavya*). This means that for the final destruction of all these passions, one has to apply vision and repeated spiritual practice of all four truths, and throughout the three realms of existence. As the *śrāvaka* progresses in this pursuit, he attains the ten kinds of knowledge as follows: When he initially enters the path to liberation, he first develops patience regarding the truth of suffering (*duḥkhasatya*) in relation to those passions that belong to the realm of sensual passion. This moment is called “patience regarding the truth with respect to suffering” (*duḥkhe dharmakṣānti*). In this moment, what is destroyed is that particular part of the ten passions that belongs to the realm of sensual passion and that is to be destroyed by vision of the truth of suffering. As the *śrāvaka*, in this moment, is not yet free from desire, he acquires conventional knowledge (*saṃvṛtījñāna*). This moment is followed by a second moment in which the same truth is fully understood. This moment is called “knowledge of the truth with respect to suffering” (*duḥkhe dharmajñāna*). In this moment, the *śrāvaka* makes sure that the part of the passions that was annihilated in the previous moment does not reoccur.

The *śrāvaka* now takes possession of two more types of knowledge: knowledge of the doctrine (*dharmajñāna*) and knowledge of suffering (*duḥkhajñāna*). This second moment is followed by a third moment, which is related to that part of the passions that is to be destroyed by vision of the truth of suffering and belongs to the higher two realms. This moment is called “subsequent patience regarding the truth with respect to suffering” (*duḥkhe ’nvayaḥkṣānti*). The final destruction of this part of the passions, i.e., the certitude that also this part of the passions will not reoccur, is called “subsequent

16 For a discussion on the different theories that have been formulated concerning the relation between knowledge and meditative attainment see Cox (1992, 65–66 and 83–86).

knowledge regarding the truth with respect to suffering” (*dukkhe ’nvayajñāna*). In this fourth moment, the *śrāvaka* also takes possession of subsequent knowledge (*anvaya-jñāna*). As there are four truths, there are sixteen moments in this “path of vision” (*darśanamārga*). In the sixth moment, knowledge of the origin (*samudayajñāna*) is further acquired; in the tenth moment, knowledge of cessation (*nirodhajñāna*); and in the fourteenth moment, knowledge of the path (*mārgajñāna*).

Having reached the sixteenth moment on the path of vision, the *śrāvaka* enters the stream towards liberation. He now has to subdue that part of the same passions that is to be annihilated through repeated spiritual practice. While doing so, he continues cultivating the seven kinds of knowledge he has already attained on the path of vision. Once the *śrāvaka* has attained the fruit of nonreturning (*anāgamyaphala*), i.e., the last of the noble fruits (*śrāmanyaphala*) before attaining *arhat*-ship, he obtains the knowledge of the thoughts of others (*paracittajñāna*), as he is now completely freed from the realm of sensual passion. When the *śrāvaka* has accomplished his task of completely destroying all passions, he obtains the last two kinds of knowledge: knowledge of destruction (*kṣayajñāna*), i.e., knowing that all passions have been destroyed, and knowledge of nonorigination (*anutpādayajñāna*), i.e., knowing that one is no longer subject to rebirth.<sup>17</sup> Because with the obtainment of the knowledge of destruction and of the knowledge of nonorigination the *śrāvaka* enters Nirvāṇa, he equals the Tathāgata. These two kinds of knowledge therefore pertain to the Tathāgata only (T.28.1550, 821b24–c2).

Table 1: *The obtainment of knowledge on the path to liberation*

path of vision ( <i>darśanamārga</i> )		
	moment 1	conventional knowledge ( <i>samvṛtījñāna</i> )
	moment 2	knowledge of the doctrine ( <i>dharmajñāna</i> ) knowledge of suffering ( <i>dukkhajñāna</i> )
	moment 4	subsequent knowledge ( <i>anvayajñāna</i> )
	moment 6	knowledge of the origin ( <i>samudayajñāna</i> )
	moment 10	knowledge of cessation ( <i>nirodhajñāna</i> )
	moment 14	knowledge of the path ( <i>mārgajñāna</i> )
path of spiritual practice ( <i>bhāvanāmārga</i> )		
		knowledge of the thoughts of others ( <i>paracittajñāna</i> ) knowledge of destruction ( <i>kṣayajñāna</i> ) knowledge of nonorigination ( <i>anutpādayajñāna</i> )

17 The earliest description of this path is found in Dharmaśreṣṭhin’s *\*Abhidharmahṛdaya*, a non-Vaibhāṣika Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma text that has to be dated around the beginning of the Common Era. (See T.28.1550, 820b25–c18) Notice that it might be that a *śrāvaka*, actually, is already free from desire when entering the path of vision. In that case, he possesses the knowledge of the thoughts of others from the outset.

The idea of individual progress that is evident from the above is also visible in the related concept of the so-called “powers of cognition” (*jñānabala*). A list of ten powers of cognition already figured in the *Samyuktāgama* as a part of a discussion on the difference between the fully awakened (*samyaksambuddha*) Tathāgata and the *arhat* who is liberated through wisdom (*prajñāvimukta*). Of this series of ten powers of cognition, two are particularly important in light of the development of the interpretation of time provided in the previous section: the “power of the cognition of one’s former abodes or existences” (*pūrvanivāsajñānabala*), i.e., the Buddha’s power to know all his and all other beings’ previous existences; and the “power of the cognition of death and rebirth of sentient beings” (*cyutyupapāda-jñānabala*), i.e., the Buddha’s power to see with his divine eye (*divyacakṣus*) the place of death and rebirth of all beings. These two powers of cognition are developed in a trance state (*dhyāna*) and have a material form as cognitive object.<sup>18</sup>

While the possession of these powers of cognition is, according to the *Samyuktāgama*, (i.e., according to Śrāvakayāna Buddhism) (T.2.99, 186c17–187b5),<sup>19</sup> only possible for the Tathāgata, with the development of the Mahāyāna, they were thought not to be unique for the historical Buddha, but also to be obtained by the Buddhist adept. This can be inferred from Dharmasreṣṭhin’s *\*Abhidharmabydaya* in which the powers of cognition are discussed with respect to their

18 The other eight are: the power of the cognition of the possible and impossible (*sthānāsthānājñānabala*), i.e., the Buddha’s power to know all factors, their causes and conditions (*hetupratyaya*), and the mechanism of their fruits of retribution (*vipākaphalānīyāma*); the power of the cognition of retribution of action (*karmavipākajñānabala*), i.e., the power to know the sphere of action (*karmasthāna*) of all kinds of actions of the past, present, and future; the power of the cognition of trances, liberations, meditative attainments and *samādhis* (*dhyānavimokṣasamādhisamāpattijñānabala*), i.e., the power to know all these auxiliary factors of the path to liberation; the power of the cognition of higher and lower faculties (*indriyaparāparajñānabala*), i.e., the power to know the moral faculties of all beings; the power of the cognition of resolve (*nānādhimuktijñānabala*), i.e., the power to know the purity (*prasāda*) and the inclinations (*ruci*) of all beings; the power of the cognition of dispositions (*nānādhātujñānabala*), i.e., the power to know acquired dispositions of all beings in all spheres of existence; the power of the cognition of the courses (*sarvatragāminīpratipajñānabala*), i.e., the power to know which way leads to which destination; and the power of the cognition of the destruction of impure influence (*āsravakṣayajñānabala*), i.e., the power to know the destruction of impure influence, the nature of impure influence and the mindset of himself and of all beings.

19 An abridged version of the same is found in T.2.99, 189a7–13. For an extensive treatment of the ten powers of cognition: See Lamotte (1970, III: 1524–1563). Sanskrit versions of the *Daśabalasūtra* are quoted in the *Sphuṭārthābhidharmakośavyākhyā*: Wogihara (1971, 614: 1.14–642, 1.26), attesting many variants. For fragments of manuscripts: see Lamotte (1970, III: 1506). For other variants: see Lamotte (1970, III: 1509–1510). These ten powers of cognition are also enumerated in the *Ekottarāgama* (T.2.125, 776b16–c20), which continues with listing four kinds of confidence (*vaiśāradya*), equally possessed by the Tathāgata (T.2.125, 776c20–777a5). These two series also figure in the “Greater Discourse on the Lion’s Roar” of the *Majjhimanikāya* (MN I: Trenckner (1988, 71), Horner (1954, 95–97).

mutual relation, and with respect to their relation with the ten kinds of knowledge (*jñāna*) a *śrāvaka* takes possession of when progressing on the path to liberation, a treatment that suggests that the *śrāvaka* also has part in them.<sup>20</sup> This also explains why the *\*Abhidharmamahādaya* and Dharmatrāta's *\*Samyuktābhidharmamahādaya* deal with this topic in the chapter "Knowledge".<sup>21</sup> The order in which the ten powers of cognition are discussed in these works is also the order we find in the *Samyuktāgama*, and is the order as it became standardized in the Sarvāstivāda literature.<sup>22</sup> According to the *\*Abhidharmamahādaya*, the first power of cognition comprises the ten forms of knowledge a *śrāvaka* develops (T.28.1550, 820b26–c18). For the other nine powers of cognition, Dharmasreṣṭhin only states that they are different from the first power of cognition as to the number of knowledges they comprise (T.28.1550, 822c29–823a14).<sup>23</sup> Dharmatrāta's *\*Samyuktābhidharmamahādaya*, a work that is heavily influenced by Vaibhāṣika viewpoints, further informs us that the power of cognition of the former abodes or existences comprises one knowledge: the knowledge of former existences, which is a type of conventional knowledge, and that the same is true for the power of cognition of birth and death (T.28.1552, 922a15–16 and 922b2–3 resp).<sup>24</sup> The possibility to know previous existences obviously relates to the progressive aspect we delineated above.

Dharmatrāta's *\*Samyuktābhidharmamahādaya* as well as the *\*Abhidharmamahāvibhāṣāśāstra* further list the ten powers of cognition together with a corresponding series comprising four types of confidence (*vaiśāradya*), great compassion (*mahākaruṇā*), and three kinds of mindfulness (*smṛtyupasthāna*), thus forming a list of eighteen factors. This list is called the "eighteen unique factors (āveṇikadharmā) of a Buddha" (T.28.1552, 922c16–18; T.27.1545, 85a26–27, 156c16 ff., 624a14–15, 735c16–18). The Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma literature thus appears to have developed a series of "eighteen unique factors of a Buddha",

20 The Chinese version of this text was done by Saṃghadeva and Huiyuan in 391 CE. See T.28.1550, 809a5–7; T.50.2059, 357c23–361b13; T.55.2145, 72c29, 99c17–18. See also Willemen (1975, xxxii, note # 40). For a detailed study of this concept: see Dessein (2010).

21 The *\*Abhidharmamahādaya* first discusses the elements of existence (*dharmā*), the formations (*saṃskāra*) that are responsible for the process of causality, and the actual actions (*karman*) that beings commit. After this initial exposition, the author outlines the passions (*anuśaya*) that are the fundamentals of the actions committed, and the phases of nobility (*ārya*) a *śrāvaka* goes through to eventually reach *arhat*-ship. These two chapters can be considered as the core chapters of the text as the passions are the fundamentals of rebirth, and the phases of nobility form the antipode to *saṃsāra*. In the chapters on knowledge (*jñāna*) and concentration (*samādhi*), the qualities attained while progressing on the path to liberation are addressed. Note that also the *sūtra* literature urged the *bhikṣus* to develop the powers of cognition. (See T.2.125, 777a12–13)

22 On the likely Sarvāstivāda affiliation of the *Samyuktāgama*: see Waldschmidt (1980, 136, 139, 148).

23 See also Willemen (1975, 101–4), Armelin (1978, 152–3).

24 See also de La Vallée Poussin (1971, V: 71).

of which it is explicitly stated that they do not belong to the *śrāvaka* or to the *pratyekabuddha* (T.27.1545, 158a4–11).

Table 2: *The relation between the powers of cognition and the ten kinds of knowledge*

Power of cognition	Ten kinds of knowledge
power of the cognition of the possible and impossible ( <i>sthānāsthānajñānabala</i> ),	conventional knowledge ( <i>saṃvṛtijñāna</i> ) knowledge of the doctrine ( <i>dharmajñāna</i> ) knowledge of suffering ( <i>duḥkhajñāna</i> ) subsequent knowledge ( <i>anvayaajñāna</i> ) knowledge of the origin ( <i>samudayaajñāna</i> ) knowledge of cessation ( <i>nirodhajñāna</i> ) knowledge of the path ( <i>mārgajñāna</i> ) knowledge of the thoughts of others ( <i>paracittajñāna</i> ) knowledge of destruction ( <i>kṣayaajñāna</i> ) knowledge of nonorigination ( <i>anutpāda-jñāna</i> )
power of the cognition of one's former abodes or existences ( <i>pūrvanivāsajñānabala</i> )	conventional knowledge ( <i>saṃvṛtijñāna</i> )
power of the cognition of death and rebirth of sentient beings ( <i>cyutyupapāda-jñānabala</i> )	conventional knowledge ( <i>saṃvṛtijñāna</i> )

This explicit statement in the *\*Abhidharmamahāvibhāṣāśāstra* notwithstanding, we have learnt from the above that when a *śrāvaka* progresses on the path to liberation, he takes possession of ten types of knowledge, the last two of which consists of his transformation from being a *śrāvaka* to being Buddha-like. Along with taking possession of these ten types of knowledge, the *śrāvaka* also develops powers of cognition, the last two of which are types of conventional knowledge that enable him to look back on previous existences. The fact that a *śrāvaka* becomes Buddha-like, and that he takes possession of powers of cognition which in Sūtra literature were stated to be unique for the Buddha, conflates at least some qualities of a *śrāvaka* and a Buddha.

In circumstances where, on the one hand, some characteristics were ascribed to the Buddha only, and, on the other hand, no difference seems to have been made between some qualities of the Buddha and of the liberated *śrāvaka*—both were called “*arhat*” (See Bareau 1957)<sup>25</sup>—discussion arose as to what precisely the difference between an *arhat* and a *buddha* consisted of, and the infallibility

25 See also Jaini (1992) and Bronkhorst (2000, 127–8).

of an *arhat* became questioned. As a result, some Buddhists no longer regarded *arhat*-ship as the ultimate goal of religious praxis, but they chose to strive for *bodhisattva*-ship, thus aspiring to become a Buddha—or, at least, to possess the same qualities a Buddha has. The Mahāyāna acceptance of a simultaneous existence of multiple Buddhist universes, each with its own Buddha, naturally further enhanced this possibility.

The development of the concept of the *bodhisattvayāna* thus radically changed the path of cultivation. Nāgārjuna's *Mahāprajñāpāramitāsāstra*, a commentary on the *\*Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā*, an expanded version of the *Prajñāpāramitāsūtra*, gives us detailed information on this new path.<sup>26</sup> Addressing the issue of the powers of cognition, the text states: "(Moreover,) Śāriputra, the Bodhisattva-Mahāsattva who wants to understand the ten powers of cognition (*jñānabala*), (...), should develop *prajñāpāramitā* (T.25.1509, 235a28–b1)."<sup>27</sup>

In the subsequent explanation, it is stated that the qualities just enumerated are peculiar for the Buddha, and that a *bodhisattva* should first exercise the qualities of a *śrāvaka* in order to convince the *śrāvakas* and the *pratyekabuddhas* to turn to the Mahāyāna (T.25.1509, 235b1–c3). This statement clearly depicts the *śrāvakayāna* as a preparatory vehicle for the *bodhisattvayāna*, as it is further stated that, having acquired the qualities of the *śrāvaka*, the *bodhisattva* is desirous of obtaining or desirous of knowing the qualities that particularly pertain to the Buddha. To attain this aim, he must cultivate *prajñāpāramitā* (T.25.1509, 235c3–21, 236b10–12, b21–22).

The *\*Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā* also gives evidence that a *bodhisattva* must first develop the qualities of a *śrāvaka*. According to this work, a *bodhisattva* has twenty-one characteristic marks, seventeen of which he shares with a *śrāvaka* and four of which he shares with the Buddha (See Conze 1961, 203–12). That the *bodhisattva* possesses characteristics that partly belong to a *śrāvaka* and partly to the Buddha may be explained by the following: contrary to the Buddha, a *bodhisattva* delays his eventual entry into *nirvāṇa* and remains in *saṃsāra* with the purpose of consecrating himself for the well-being of worldlings (*prthagjana*) as long as possible. First practicing the *śrāvakayāna* may enable him to help the adherents of this vehicle shift to the Mahāyāna.

26 The 2nd century text was translated into Chinese as *Da zhidu lun* (T.25.1509) by Kumārajīva between 402–6. (See T.25.1509, 756c9–18; T.55.2145, 75b10–18) Kumārajīva translated the *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā* simultaneously. See also Lamotte (1970, III: v–vi, xlv–l). The short recension is the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*. The long recensions are the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*, the *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā* and the *ṣaṭasāhasrikā*.

27 See also T.8.222, 149b8–9.



That the *bodhisattva* indeed can obtain the powers of cognition is affirmed in the *Mahāprajñāpāramitāsāstra*, as follows:

The *bodhisattvas* have not yet obtained the ten powers of cognition, and the *śrāvaka* and the *pratyekabuddha* are unable to obtain them. So why are they mentioned now? Answer: Although a *śrāvaka* is unable to attain them, when he hears about the quality of these ten powers of cognition, he thinks: “The Buddha has such great qualities,” and he rejoices himself in saying: “We have obtained great gains and abundant good.” Thanks to the purity of their faith, they enter the path of destruction of suffering. When the *bodhisattvas* hear about [the ten powers of cognition], they diligently cultivate the path of the *bodhisattva*, and at will obtain such ten powers of cognition and other fruits of great quality (T.25.1509, 236a14–19).

and:

Because the Buddha has such qualities, therefore one should think about the Buddha. The Bodhisattva–Mahāsattva therefore wants to obtain the ten powers of cognition, the four types of confidence and the eighteen unique factors of the Buddha, and he thus should study *prajñāpāramitā* (T.25.1509, 236b9–12).

The difference between a *bodhisattva* and the Buddha is also visible in the following passage of the *Mahāprajñāpāramitāsāstra*: When the question is raised why, with thirty-six attributes of the Buddha (ten powers of cognition, four types of confidence, three kinds of recollection, great compassion and eighteen unique factors), only eighteen are said to be unique (*āveṇika*), the answer given is that the *śrāvakas* and the *pratyekabuddhas* possess part of the first eighteen, but have no part in the second series of eighteen (T.25.1509, 247b19–22). This is also affirmed in the following:

The *arhat*, *pratyekabuddha* and *bodhisattva* (in some way take part in the ten powers of cognition that Kātyāyanīputra took for attribute unique for the Buddha): they too know the possible and impossible, have the power of cognition of retribution, have the (power of) cognition of *dhyāna* and *samāpatti* and so up to the (power of) cognition of the extinction of impure influence (T.25.1509, 255b25–c22).

As according to the Mahāyāna *arhat*-ship is no longer the ultimate goal of religious praxis, acquiring the qualities that before were ascribed to the fully enlightened *arhat*—among which are the ten powers of cognition—is not the end of the

religious path. Having attained this stage, the *bodhisattva* must still progress on to the further stages of the *bodhisattva* (*bodhisattvabhūmi*).

That a *bodhisattva* was not thought of as completely identical to the Buddha is evident from the fact that the Mahāyāna *sūtras* came to develop separate lists of characteristics for a *bodhisattva* and the Buddha. The newly developed list of factors that are unique for the Buddha is of a non-canonical origin, however, and is adopted in the Mahāyāna texts.

To sum up: while the *sūtra* literature differentiated ten powers of cognition as exclusive attributes of the Tathāgata, the *\*Abhidharmamahāvibhāṣāśāstra* and the Sarvāstivāda texts that postdate this text add a series of other elements to these ten, and call them the “unique factors of the Buddha”. With the rise of the *bodhisattvayāna*, the religious career of the adept drastically changed. According to the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā* literature, the *bodhisattva* first had to develop the qualities that also a *śrāvaka* and a *pratyekabuddha* possess, and then has to, through exercising *prajñāpāramitā*, also develop the qualities of a Buddha. This explains why early lists of attributes of a *bodhisattva* contain some qualities that are peculiar for a *śrāvaka* and some that belong to the Tathāgata. Gradually, however, separate lists of unique factors of a *bodhisattva* and unique factors of the Buddha were developed. This led to a new, non-canonical, list of eighteen unique factors of the Buddha. The ten powers of cognition no longer figure in this new list, as they became interpreted as also belonging to *arhat*-ship.

## Progress, Free Will, and Buddhist Modernity

It is clear from the above that the accentuation of an individual's free will, the notion of progress, and the accentuation of both knowledge and meditative attainment in the Buddhist path to liberation are elements that have the potential to fuse with European concepts of “modernity”. Before this could actually happen, however, also the European interpretation of the concept time had to undergo fundamental developments. A first such major shift in the way time was perceived in Europe was brought about by the Christian scholastic thinking. After the establishment of history writing in ancient Greece in the 5th century BCE had deviated the attention from the realm of the sacred, the mythical and the mythological, and redirected it to the profane world (see Göllar and Mittag 2008, 17),<sup>28</sup> Augustinus (354–430) again rendered life on earth untrue

28 Eliade (1986, 97) remarks that archaic time concepts are characterized by an annihilation of concrete time, i.e., an anti-historical tendency, the refusal to preserve a memory of the past. This, so he claims, is a refusal of archaic man to perceive himself as a historical being.

and without value. According to the Christian doctrine, humans are alienated from themselves and will only return to themselves in the transcendent empire of God. Profane life is not meaningful *an sich*, but is only meaningful in its transcendental function. Another important aspect of the Christian faith is its universal claim: all human beings are created by God and therefore do not merely have the potential to turn to God, but are even summoned to take part in the divine plan to become part of the ecclesiastical community (See Göller and Mittag 2008, 25–31).

A second major shift was brought about starting from the middle of the 15th century, when the development of the physical sciences in the age of Humanism and Renaissance revealed that both time and space are endless. This not only challenged the Augustinian view, but also reinterpreted the role of human beings: they became individual actors in an endless time and space, and personal freedom was seen as a prerequisite for human beings to be able to act individually and creatively (See Casirer 1927, 46).

In the previous sections, we have outlined that, in Buddhism, the cyclic time concept entails an aspect of progress, and that, with the development of the Mahāyāna, human beings—*śrāvakas*—were thought to be able to partake in part of the qualities of the Buddha, in this encouraged by the simultaneous existence of multiple universes and Buddhas. Given, further, that the decision to pursue the path towards Buddha-hood is based on a human being's free will, it may therefore be no surprise that the 18th century Europe's appreciation of Buddhism is based on the Buddhist doctrine's rationality.<sup>29</sup> As Peter Harvey stated (2013, 419):

Like Christianity, Buddhism had a noble ethical system, but it appeared to be a religion of self-help, not dependent on God or priests. Like science, it seemed to be based on experience, saw the universe as ruled by law, and did not regard humans and animals as radically distinct.

Into the 1960s, Buddhism in Europe remained primarily focused on the rationality of the Buddhist doctrine, and its preoccupation with intellect and experience; cultic activities were often seen as a degeneration of the “original” Buddhism (Baumann 1992, 17).

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<sup>29</sup> In the world of philosophy, Buddhism reached the West through such thinkers as Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860) who, however, conflated concepts of Buddhism and Hinduism. In the field of literature, we can mention, e.g., Hermann Hesse's 1922 *Siddhartha* and the poems by Allen Ginsberg and Gary Snyder (see Tonkinson 1995), and in the field of psycho-analysis, Carl Jung is known to have been influenced by Buddhist practices. (See Harvey 2013, 419–20) For the latter: see Fromm, Suzuki, and De Mortino (1963).

As we have outlined above, the Buddhist path to liberation was from the outset characterized by an intricate interplay between knowledge and meditative attainment. That is, engaging in meditative practices does not necessarily infringe on modern man's claim to rationality—actually, the very reverse is true. This may be one element in explaining the popularity of a variety of forms of meditative practices in modern Europe that became prominent in the 1970s (Baumann 1992, 17). Peter Harvey continues his description of the appreciation of Buddhism in Europe as follows (2013, 419): “Yet for those with a taste for mysticism, such as those touched by the Romantic movement, it offered more than science.”

Since the 1970s, Buddhist modernity in Europe has also seen an increase in Buddhist groups, organizations, and temples that define themselves as Vajrayāna, with, judging from the internet World Buddhist Directory, 44.7% of the Buddhist groups, centers, monasteries/temples, and organizations in 2010 defining themselves as “Vajrayāna”, followed by those of “Mahāyāna” affiliation (36.2 %), “Theravāda” (11.7 %), and “Non-sectarian/Mixed” affiliation (7.2 %).<sup>30</sup>

That Buddhism also serves an individual “modern” agenda may be evident from a glance at the table of contents of Damien Keown's *Contemporary Buddhist Ethics* (2000) where we find such topics listed as Buddhism and Ecology, Buddhism and Human Rights, Buddhism and Abortion, etc.

Also, in Asia, the coming in of the modern world has changed the face of Buddhism. Discussing Buddhism in Sri Lanka, Richard Gombrich and Gananath Obeyesekere (1988, 126) suggested that what they call “Protestant Buddhism” both protested against European colonization and Christian missionization, a process in which emphasis is put on an individual's seeking for their ultimate goal without intermediaries. “Under the influence of Protestantism”, they claim, “Religion is privatized and internalized: the truly significant is not what takes place at a public celebration or in ritual, but what happens inside one's own mind or soul”.<sup>31</sup> This development is indeed similar to the advent of Protestantism in Europe that, in its critique of Catholicism, advocated that trust in men could endanger the soul, and provided the individual with a direct access to God (Weber 1951, 241).

Discussing contemporary China, Goossaert and Palmer (2011, 304) claimed that:

At a basic level, then, the emergence of religious modernity can be said to be characterized by a shift in the relative importance of preexisting

30 For a detailed overview: see Harvey (2013, 451–6).

31 See also McMahan (2008, 7).

forms of Chinese religiosity, from the ascriptive communal cults employing religious specialists to voluntary, congregational, and body-cultivational styles.(...) Another point of continuity—which is also the defining “modern” characteristic of most of these movements—is their conscious identification with tradition, in relation to, though not necessarily in opposition to, a modern secularist culture in which religion is constantly obliged to justify itself, often resorting to modernist or scientific arguments. The traditions thus formulated can be considered “reinvented” in the sense that they create new compositions out of selected elements of tradition—elements often selected for their perceived compatibility with modern, secular values.

From the philosophical developments outlined above, it may be clear that such a “reinvention” of tradition permeates the whole Buddhist history.

## Conclusion

Buddhist doctrine has, from the outset, seen an intricate connection between the dynamic process of *karman* that operates through conditioned production, and time. It was the Sarvāstivādins who tried to explain precisely how these are technically related. While the earlier non-Vaibhāṣika Sarvāstivādins saw time as inherent in the discrete factors themselves, the Vaibhāṣika Sarvāstivādins regarded discrete factors and time each to have an independent reality. They developed the concept of a relative time, i.e., time as it regards one particular discrete factor, and an absolute time that, once a human being has returned to a “timeless origin” preserves a latent existence. This strengthened a human being’s position as a creative actor with respect to their particular relative time. For the further development of Buddhism, the importance of this interpretation was that the notion of “individual progress” was strengthened, albeit within a fundamentally cyclic concept of time. The Buddhist time concept thus came to hold a position within a strict cyclic time concept and a strict linear concept. The philosophical value of this development was that Buddhism more clearly became neither fatalistic nor determinist—it became “modern”. The accentuation of an individual’s free will, the notion of progress, and the accentuation of both knowledge and meditative attainment in the Buddhist path to liberation are elements that could fuse with European concepts of “modernity” and may, therefore, be helpful in trying to explain the possibility of Buddhist modernity.

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