Buddhist Omniscience

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"Omniscience, at least for one who is not himself omniscient, is merely an opinion."

Nathan Katz, *Buddhist Images of Human Perfection*, p. 255.

(King Pasenadi speaking to Śākyamuni):

"I asked the Lord about omniscience and he explained omniscience to me in a manner which pleases, satisfies and gladdens me."

Lord Chalmers, trans., *Further Dialogues of the Buddha, Vol. 2*, p. 70.

Omniscience in the Indian context

The concept of omniscience has a long history in Indian thought.[1] The Vedas themselves do not contain the word "omniscience," but at several points they refer to similar concepts. The god of fire, Agni, is one of the most popular figures addressed in the Vedic hymns, and a common epithet for him is "*Jātavedas*," which means "knowing all created beings." However, the Vedas exhibit a characteristic known as kathenotheism, which consists of the tendency to address various different gods each as supreme. There are a bewildering variety of gods addressed in the Vedic hymns, but no one of them is clearly pre-eminent. Instead, depending upon which god the particular hymn is addressed to, that god will be lauded with a collection of superlatives, which are addressed to a different god in another hymn. Thus high honors for knowledge are not exclusive to Agni by any means. Varuna, known as "chief of the gods of the natural and moral order," is

[1] Best references are found in Ram Jee Singh, *The Concept of Omniscience in Ancient Hindu Thought*.

supplicated saying: "According to his wisdom Varuṇa knoweth all." In another passage we find: "Prajāpati! thou only comprehendest all these created things, and none beside thee." With the development of the *Upaniṣads* we are on firmer ground, for here the Sanskrit word for "omniscience" does appear.[2] The general tendency of the *Upaniṣads* is to equate omniscience with knowledge of the *ātman* or soul, though there is still ascription of omniscience to the god Viṣnu, for example. The movement from the Vedas to the *Upaniṣads* thus presents a change in the concept of omniscience. What used to be reserved for the gods is now accessible to certain people as well, those who seek the *ātman*. Yet knowledge of the *ātman* is not what we normally take the word "omniscience" to mean. This indicates that omniscience has several different meanings within Indian philosophy and religion, of which the literal or common meaning, of knowing everything, is perhaps the least interesting. We may compare "omniscience" to "omnivorous," indicating that the latter certainly does not mean that one has already eaten everything, but rather that one is prepared to eat anything that is edible, which excludes a large number of things. Analogously, omniscience may be regarded as a potential rather than a *fait accompli*, the ability to know everything that is knowable, without having already known it all. And the limitation of this kind of omniscience to that which is knowable is an important distinction, since it would exclude all future events at least, as well as a large proportion of past events. This kind of omniscience we may call a figurative or metaphorical omniscience, as opposed to the more common literal omniscience. The kind of omniscience that is referred to in the *Upaniṣads* as synonymous with knowledge of the *ātman* may be designated a spiritual omniscience, since in knowing the *ātman* as identical with the fundamental nature of reality, one knows an underlying feature of all seemingly separate phenomena. These various different kinds of omniscience appear within the Buddhist tradition as well.

Omniscience in Pāli sources

Contemporaneous with the development of the *Upaniṣads* there appear in India several different religious teachers who deny the efficacy

[2] The word in Sanskrit is *sarvajña*, *sarva* meaning "all, or everything" and *jña* the regular verbal root, cognate with our English "to know."

of the Vedas entirely. The most important of these figures for our purposes are Śākyamuni Buddha and Mahavīra, who founded the religious traditions of Buddhism and Jainism. Jaina religious eschatology maintained that the soul had an innate capacity for knowledge, which was obscured by layers of karma, or accumulated sinful actions. Through religious practice, largely consisting of austerities, these layers could be burned off, and once they were all gone, the soul would be liberated. Having removed all obstacles to the soul's cognition, it would naturally follow that the soul would be omniscient. The Jains called this knowledge of the liberated soul *kevala-jñāna*, and their insistence upon the reality of this attainment forms one of the hallmarks of Jaina doctrine.[3] This is consistent both with Jaina sources themselves and with reports of Jaina doctrines in the Pāli scriptures. We find Abhaya the Licchavī saying in the *Anguttara Nikāya*: "Sir, Nātha's son, the Unclothed, claims to be all-knowing, all-seeing, and to have all-comprising knowledge and vision. He says, 'Whether I walk or stand or sleep or wake, my knowledge and vision are always and without a break present before me.' " Similarly in the *Majjhima Nikāya*: "When this had been said, monks, these Jains spoke to me thus: 'Your reverence, Nāṭaputta the Jain is all-knowing, all-seeing; he claims all-embracing knowledge-and-vision, saying: "Whether I am walking or standing still or asleep or awake, knowledge-and-vision is permanently and continuously before me." ' " Finally, the *Cūḷa-Sakuludāyi-Sutta* contains the following less than complimentary passage in which Udāyin addresses Śākyamuni:

> "Some time ago, revered sir, one who was all-knowing, all-seeing, claiming all-embracing knowledge-and-vision, said: 'Whether I am walking or standing still or asleep or awake, knowledge-and-vision is constantly and perpetually before me.' He, on being asked a question by me concerning the past, shelved the question by (asking) another, answered off the point and evinced temper and ill-will and sulkiness . . . [Buddha inquires:] 'But who was this, Udāyin, that all-know-

[3] P. S. Jaini, *The Jaina Path of Purification*, p. 260: "Absolute omniscience is in their tradition the fundamental criterion for liberation." Also, K. N. Jayatilleke, *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*, p. 204, quoting Jacobi's *Jaina Sūtras*, says that omniscience was "one of the fundamental dogmas of the Jains."

> ing, all-seeing, claiming all-embracing knowledge-and-vision . . . on being asked a question by you . . . evinced temper and ill-will and sulkiness?' [Udāyin replies:] 'Revered sir, it was Nataputta the Jain."

There are other similar passages in the Pāli *suttas*, but to ensure that the Buddhists are not misrepresenting this position of the Jainas, we may turn to their own sources, where we find: "the Jaina view of omniscience . . . may be now defined as an immediate and direct knowledge of all the objects of the universe, past, present and future, subtle and remote, far and near, by a single ever-lasting act of knowledge requiring no assistance from the senses and even mind."[4] Jaini also discusses the nature of Jaina omniscience in this way: "Such knowledge is compared to a mirror in which every one of the innumerable existents, in all its qualities and modes, is simultaneously reflected. These 'knowables' are cognized without any volition whatsoever on the part of the arhat. Furthermore, no activity of the senses or mind is involved; there is only direct perception by the soul."[5] So this Jaina omniscience would seem to be a literal kind of omniscience, which outside of the Jaina tradition is usually reserved for deities. It is an automatic kind of knowledge, requiring "no volition" and "no activity of the senses or mind." In fact, "omniscient cognition and sensory cognition are held to be mutually antithetical."[6] This follows from the Jaina conception of the soul, which is an innately knowing entity. Having removed all obscurations, this innate feature of the soul will manifest itself completely, without any possible hindrance or limitation. So crucial is this doctrine of omniscience to the Jaina tradition that it is used to validate all other Jaina teachings. Jaini writes that "the authority of the Jaina teachings rests ultimately on the fact that they were preached by an omniscient being,"[7] which seems very similar to the idea of revelation as a source for religious teaching.

The Buddhist tradition from its inception has also made use of the concept of omniscience, but in a very different manner. In the traditional account of Śākyamuni's enlightenment, the content of his

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[4] Ram Jee Singh, *The Jaina Concept of Omniscience*, p. 18.
[5] Jaini, op. cit., p. 266.
[6] ibid., pp. 34–35.
[7] ibid., p. 89.

realization is said to consist of three kinds of knowledge: of his own previous existences, clairvoyance which sees the transmigration of beings in accordance with their karma, and destruction of the *āśravas*, which are said to consist of sensual desire, desire for existence, and ignorance. Having attained enlightenment, Śākyamuni decided to teach others how to achieve the same realization after being requested by Bramhā, one of the main deities in the Hindu pantheon. Learning that his own former teachers were dead, he decided to give his first teaching to the group of five monks with whom he had previously engaged in various ascetic practices. While on his way to meet them, he encountered an ascetic named Upaka. Upaka noticed that Śākyamuni didn't look like an ordinary fellow, so he asked him,

> " 'Who is your teacher, or whose dhamma do you profess?' When this had been said, I, monks, addressed Upaka, the Naked Ascetic, in verses:
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> 'Victorious over all, omniscient am I.' "[8]

That is to say, on the basis of the previously mentioned three kinds of knowledge, Śākyamuni here claims omniscience for himself. This is obviously not meant as a literal omniscience, but as a more spiritual kind such as in the *Upaniṣads*. What is most remarkable about this passage, though, is Upaka's reaction to Śākyamuni's grand pronouncement: "Thereupon Upaka said, 'Would that it might be so, friend,' shook his head, and went off on a by-path."[9] That is to say, Upaka exhibits a thoroughly skeptical attitude to Śākyamuni's claim to omniscience, and goes off unconvinced. This reaction seems a very natural one to us, and the fact that it portrays Śakyamuni in such an uncomplimentary way directly after his enlightenment is probably good evidence for its authenticity. No later redactor would be likely to make up such a story. Even though Upaka recognizes that something about Śākyamuni is special, he does not become "the first Buddhist." The connection between the three kinds of knowledge and omniscience is also mentioned in the *Tevijja-Vacchagotta Sutta*, where Śākyamuni meets the wanderer Vacchagotta, who says that he has heard Śākyamuni

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[8] I. B. Horner, trans., *The Middle Length Sayings*, *Vol. I*, p. 214. Also E. Thomas *The Life of Buddha as Legend and History*, p. 83.

[9] Thomas, p. 83. Also Horner, p. 215.

described as omniscient, in the manner of the Jaina saints. Responding to this report, Śākyamuni replies that he has three knowledges: he can recall his past lives, he is clairvoyant, and he has become liberated by destroying the "cankers." These of course are the same three that constituted his enlightenment. Responding to Abhaya the Licchavī's statement above, Ānanda makes no mention of omniscience, but simply tells him about the basic Buddhist triad of *sīla*, *samādhi*, and *prajñā* as constituting the Buddhist path to *nirvāṇa*. On another occasion, when Śākyamuni is addressing Sandaka, he parodies the Jaina idea in this way:

> "As to this, Sandaka, some teacher, all-knowing, all-seeing, claims all-embracing knowledge-and-vision, saying: 'Whether I am walking or standing still or asleep or awake, knowledge-and-vision is constantly and perpetually before me.' He enters an empty place, and he does not obtain almsfood, and a dog bites him, and he encounters a fierce elephant, and he encounters a fierce horse, and he encounters a fierce bullock, and he asks a woman and a man their name and clan, and he asks the name of a village or a market town and the way . . . Whereupon, Sandaka, an intelligent person . . . goes away uninterested."[10]

That is to say, someone who was truly omniscient would not act in such a way, and if he claims to be omniscient yet acts in the manner described above, it is difficult to take his claim seriously. In general, we find that Śākyamuni seems to be uninterested in claims of omniscience, partly because they are notoriously difficult to verify, but largely because they are not helpful for one who seeks liberation. Continuing his talk to Sandaka quoted above, Śākyamuni distinguishes four types of unsatisfactory bases for religious teaching. The first is the example just given, of a teacher who claims to be omniscient. Second is a teacher who follows tradition. Third is a teacher who follows reason, and last is a teacher who is stupid and confused. Although the context suggests that the first type was primarily directed at the Jainas, the principle itself is expressed without reference to any specific figure, and we know from other sources that Mahāvīra was not alone in claiming

[10] I. B. Horner, trans., *The Middle Length Sayings, Vol. 2*, p. 199.

to possess omniscience. At one point in the *Mahā-Parinibbāna-Sutta*, Sāriputta addresses the Buddha thus: "Lord! such faith have I in the Exalted One, that methinks there never has been, nor will there be, nor is there now any other, whether wanderer or brahmin, who is greater and wiser than the Exalted One, that is to say, as regards the higher wisdom." This is quite a natural expression of Sāriputta's admiration for Śākyamuni, but Śākyamuni takes him to task for it, inquiring whether or not Sāriputta has personally known the minds of all other sages of the past, present, and future. Sāriputta has to admit that he has not, that he has in fact been speaking beyond his own experience. For Sāriputta to meaningfully praise Śākyamuni as being omniscient would necessitate that Sāriputta also be omniscient to verify Śākyamuni's realization. For Śākyamuni one of the root causes of human confusion and suffering is that people tend to speak beyond their own experience, and it is for this reason that he rebukes Sāriputta for speaking in such a way. This rational and critical attitude of Śākyamuni is what many people find attractive in the Pāli scriptures. It is certainly a far cry from such statements as Tertullian's famous "I believe because it is absurd." Śākyamuni considers that faith which is not based on sound reasoning and personal experience is a hindrance to spiritual realization. This anti-dogmatic attitude is exemplified in the famous goldsmith quote: "Just as wise men (test a claim to be gold) by burning, cutting and rubbing (on a touchstone), my statements, O monks, should be accepted after examination and not out of respect for me."[11] That this attitude is still illustrative of the best of the Buddhist tradition is demonstrated in a recent quote from the Dalai Lama: "If there's good, strong evidence from science that such and such is the case, and this is contrary to Buddhism, then we will change."[12]

It would be nice if we could leave the Pāli literature at this point, and simply report that Śākyamuni displayed a consistently critical attitude towards claims of omniscience, whether they were made about other teachers or addressed to himself, preferring to limit his own claims to the three kinds of knowledge we have mentioned. However, there are some further passages which render such an interpretation untenable.

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[11] Jayatilleke, p. 391, notes that "this verse is not found in the Nikāyas but it reflects the attitude of the Buddha as often represented in the Nikāyas."

[12] In the *New York Times*, October 8, 1989, Section 4, p. 6.

Chief among these is a passage in the *Kannakatthala Sutta*, which is worth quoting *in extenso*:

> "Then King Pasenadi spoke thus to the Lord: 'I have heard this about you, revered sir: "The recluse Gotama speaks thus: There is neither a recluse nor a brahmin who, all-knowing, all-seeing, can claim all-embracing knowledge-and-vision—this situation does not exist." Revered sir, those who speak thus . . . I hope that these, revered sir, speak what was spoken by the Lord, that they do not misrepresent the Lord by what is not fact, that they explain dhamma according to dhamma, and that no reasoned thesis gives occasion for contempt?'
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> 'Those, sire, who speak thus . . . do not speak as I spoke but are misrepresenting me with what is not true, with what is not fact.'. . .
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> Then King Pasenadi spoke thus to the Lord: 'Could it be, revered sir, that people might have transferred to quite another topic something (originally) said by the Lord in reference to something else? In regard to what, revered sir, does the Lord claim to have spoken the words?'
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> 'I, sire, claim to have spoken the words thus: There is neither a recluse not a brahman who at one and the same time can know all, can see all—this situation does not exist.' "

Here Śākyamuni makes a distinction between two different kinds of omniscience: one which is realized "constantly and perpetually," and the other which is more like a potential than a fully realized condition. In our typology, this is a figurative or metaphorical omniscience, as the potential to know anything that can be known, without having actualized that potential. Given the principle stated above, that Śākyamuni criticized all statements which go beyond personal experience, we are left with the conclusion that Śākyamuni in this passage was claiming the more limited form of omniscience for himself, albeit indirectly. The classic formulation of this kind of omniscience is to be found in the *Milinda-pañha*, in which there are eight separate references to Buddha's omniscience.[13] King Milinda asks: " 'Revered Nāgasena, was the

[13] See Kawasaki Shinjō, "Omniscience in Pāli Texts" (in Japanese) in *Buddhism and Its Relation to Other Religions*, pp. 187–203, for a full discussion of all these passages.

Buddha omniscient?' [Nāgasena replies] 'Yes, sire, the Lord was omniscient, but knowledge-and-vision was not constantly and continuously present to the Lord. The Lord's omniscient knowledge was dependent on the adverting (of his mind); when he adverted it he knew whatever it pleased (him to know).' " Here Śākyamuni's supposed omniscience is quite clearly defined as a potential capacity, dependent upon his intention or mental "adverting."[14] Nāgasena goes on to compare Śākyamuni's purified knowledge with a sharp arrow "fitted to a sturdy bow and shot by a strong man" which will easily penetrate any clothes made of linen, silk, or wool which are in its path.

> "As, sire, a man could put into one hand anything that had been in the other, could utter a speech through his open mouth, could swallow food that was in his mouth, opening his eyes could close them, or closing his eyes could open them, and could stretch out his bent arms or bend in his outstretched arms, sooner than this, sire, more quickly the Lord's omniscient knowledge (could function), more quickly the adverting (of his mind); when he had adverted it, he knew whatever it pleased (him to know)."

Śākyamuni's knowledge is of the same kind as ordinary knowledge, but simply heightened to the *nth* degree. If I want to think of my name, this requires very little effort on my part, due to extensive practice and familiarity. For Śākyamuni, all possible objects of knowledge are similarly familiar, and his mental training has honed his intellect to such a degree that no obstacles remain. Here again, we note that this concerns possible objects of knowledge, and not things which are unknowable by their very natures.

The *Milinda-pañha* is a fairly late text, and one can easily discern some Mahāyāna tendencies in its pages, but in this case it simply works out the implications of the *Kannakatthala Sutta's* statement given above. While we have no sure way of dating the Pāli literature or separating it into different strata, based on the doctrinal development we have noted, it is not unreasonable to suppose that the composition

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[14] The Pali word used is *avajjana*, which may also be translated as "concentration." Jaini uses "reflection" in translating this same passage.

of the *Kaṇṇakatthala Sutta* occurred at a later period than that of the other sources cited above. It is very possible that Śākyamuni's disinterested attitude towards the issue of omniscience reflects his real feelings, and that later statements attributed to him where he appears to claim some form of omniscience for himself were interpolations created by disciples who felt uncomfortable comparing their teacher with Mahāvīra, who had claimed a literal kind of omniscience all along. It seems that the idea of omniscience would never have become an issue in the Buddhist tradition (at least not at this early stage) if there had not been other forces at work, competing with Buddhist teachings. Under pressure from rival sects, loyal Buddhists desired that the figure of their own founder not be regarded as inferior, and so they naturally wished to praise him as extravagantly as possible, after the manner of Sāriputta above. However, they were stuck with a pre-existing textual tradition wherein Śākyamuni displays a critical attitude towards claims of omniscience made by his contemporaries, and so the compiler(s) of the *Kaṇṇakatthala Sutta* had to reinterpret the idea of omniscience itself in order to apply it to their revered founder. As we shall see, in so doing they initiated a controversy which was to continue for as long as there were Buddhists in India.

Transitional stages

At about the same time as the composition of the *Milinda-pañha* or shortly thereafter, the Buddhist tradition began to produce a new set of scriptures known collectively as the *Prajñāpāramitā* literature. These scriptures mark the inception of the movement that came to be known as Mahāyāna Buddhism, which spread from India through Tibet, central Asia, and China into Japan. The *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras* themselves come in various lengths, of which the version in 8000 lines is generally regarded as the oldest, dating from around the beginning of the Christian era. This scripture continues to use the same word, *sarvajña*, to designate the Buddha's omniscience, but the sense of this word has changed dramatically. For example:

> "When one trains oneself on those stages, one trains oneself in Buddhahood, or the state of all-knowledge; and thereby in the immeasurable and incalculable Buddha-dharmas. Thereby one trains oneself neither for the increase of

form, feeling, etc., nor yet for their decrease; neither to appropriate form, etc., nor to let them go. Nor does one train oneself to get hold of any other dharma, even of all-knowledge, nor to produce one, or make one disappear. When he trains thus, a Bodhisattva trains in all-knowledge, and he shall go forth to all-knowledge."

"It is because the Lord has trained himself in just this perfection of wisdom that the Tathagata has acquired and known full enlightenment or all-knowledge . . . this all-knowledge of the Tathagata has come forth from the perfection of wisdom."

"The perfection of wisdom, O Lord, is the accomplishment of the cognition of the all-knowing. The perfection of wisdom is the state of all-knowledge."

"Perfect wisdom is the source of the all-knowledge of the Buddhas."

"All-knowledge is immeasurable and unlimited. What is immeasurable and unlimited, that is not form, or any other skandha. That is not attainment, or reunion, or getting there; not the path or its fruit; not cognition, or consciousness; not genesis, or destruction, or production, or passing away, or stopping, or development, or annihilation. It has not been made by anything, it has not come from anywhere, it does not go to anywhere, it does not stand in any place or spot. On the contrary, it comes to be styled 'immeasurable, unlimited.' From the immeasurableness of space is the immeasurableness of all-knowledge. But what is immeasurableness that does not lend itself to being fully known by anything, be it form, or any skandha, or any of the six perfections. Because form is all-knowledge, and so are the other skandhas, and the six perfections."

I give such an extensive variety of quotes to demonstrate the problems faced by commentators on the PP scriptures. What is stated plainly in one place is contradicted in another, and any feeling of "Ah, now I understand," does not last for very long. The frustrating obscurity of this text leads one to have sympathy for Poussin, who denounced "Indian '*philosophumena*' concocted by ascetics . . . men exhausted by a

severe diet and often stupefied by the practice of ecstasy."[15] Conze himself, who probably was more familiar than any Westerner (and most Orientals) with this literature, says, "The Prajñāpāramitā sutras in turn fascinate and exasperate the student, in turn raise him to the very heights of elation, and then again reduce him to a condition of baffled helplessness."[16] However, we may venture to make a few tentative observations, keeping in mind that whoever wrote the *Prajñāpāramitā* scriptures would probably never agree with anything we try to say about them. The first point is linguistic, and is simply that the word here translated as "all-knowledge" is indeed *sarvajñatā*, an abstract form of the same word used in the Pāli literature for the omniscience of Buddha and Mahāvīra. The Buddha here retains his faculty of omniscience, but both Buddha and omniscience are very different from what we found in the Pāli sources. Furthermore, this seems to be omniscience in the secondary sense noted above, that is not a complete permanent knowledge of everything, but a knowledge of "perfect wisdom," which is generally understood to imply a realization of emptiness. This type of omniscience is thus not very different from the spiritual or *Upaniṣadic* type, where it is regarded as the culmination of intensive meditative analysis. The mere term "perfect wisdom," considered in isolation, is not a bad gloss of the literal meaning of omniscience, but in a Buddhist context, and particularly in the *Prajñāpāramitā* scriptures, both these terms have very specific technical senses, which the later commentators develop.

The other important version of the *Prajñāpāramitā* scriptures is the version in 25,000 lines, which is essentially an expanded version of the earlier one. Conze dates the only surviving complete Sanskrit version of this text to the 5th century, and considers it as a recast version of an earlier original. It has been reorganized with a view to bringing its contents more in line with the sequence of the *Abhisamayālaṃkāra*. It is in this text that we first encounter the three different kinds of omnisciences which are explained by the *Abhisamayālaṃkāra*. *Sarvajñatā* is demoted from its position as the realization of the Buddha to that of Hīnayana practitioners, while the Buddha's omniscience is designated by a new term, *sarvākārajñatā*, or overall omniscience. This is a rather

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[15] Quoted in L. M. Joshi, *Discerning the Buddha*, p. 7.

[16] Conze "On Omniscience and the Goal" in *Middle Way*, Vol. 22, No. 3, p. 63.

clumsy attempt to exalt the Buddha while denigrating Hīnayāna, and the awkward English of "overall omniscience" as opposed to simply "omniscience" sounds just as strange in Sanskrit. Between these two is the bodhisattva, whose realization is called *mārgajñatā*. However the usage of these terms is not fully consistent in this text. In this text as well, omniscience (or overall omniscience) is generally synonymous with enlightenment or Buddhahood.

The best known commentator on the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras* is undoubtedly Nāgārjuna, the founder of the Madhyamaka philosophical school, whose writings on emptiness express the direct or explicit meaning of the *Prajñāpāramitā* texts. Nāgārjuna himself uses the term "omniscient" only once, to my knowledge, in his salutation verse at the beginning of his *Ratnāvalī*, but without any attempt to define its meaning. Thus we have no clear idea of what "omniscience" means at this period in Buddhist history, although we can be fairly sure that it means neither what it meant before, for Nāgasena and his predecessors, nor does it mean what it later comes to mean within Mahāyāna. The word itself remains the same, but its meaning is undergoing a transformation.

We should mention here that there is another work attributed to Nagārjuna and extant only in Chinese, the *Mahāprajñāpāramitôpadeśa-śāstra* (MPPS). There is mention of both *sarvajña* and *sarvâkārajña* in this work, but following Hikata we may presume that the presence of the latter, as well as any distinction between these two terms, is probably more properly attributed to Kumārajīva rather than Nāgārjuna. Yet even in this text, although both terms are used, there is no clear distinction between them, with Buddha acclaimed as omniscient (*sarvajña* and/or *sarvâkārajña*), while such an attainment is denied to Hīnayāna practitioners. This text is probably earlier than the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra in 25,000 Lines* mentioned above.

Omniscience for Vasubandhu

Following this transitional phase, we next come to that landmark of Buddhist literature, the *Abhidharma-kośa*. Composed around the middle of the 4th century, this work represents the culmination of earlier Buddhist practices into a sophisticated philosophical system. Dating from after the start of the Mahāyāna, the *Kośa* is one of the last great

works of early Buddhism to be composed in India. Its author Vasubandhu has the distinction[17] of being one of the only Buddhist authors to achieve renown in both branches of Buddhist philosophy, the earlier Hīnayāna as well as the later Mahāyāna. Within the *Kośa* itself, however, we find only scant references to the concept of omniscience, which here retains its early form as *sarvajña*. The discussions of omniscience occur within the framework of sectarian disputations among the several groups (traditionally given as eighteen) which had arisen by this time, each with their own special ways of interpreting Buddhist doctrine.

We start with an objection from a *Vātsīputrīya* standpoint. This sect held that there must be an underlying basis of continuity to the person, which they called the *pudgala*. This was regarded by most other sects as virtually identical to the *ātman*, and the *Vātsīputrīya* assertion of the *pudgala* was the object of repeated scorn and ridicule. In this context the *Vātsīputrīya* claimed that the *pudgala* must have more than a momentary existence in order for Buddha to know everything. A mere series of mental instants cannot possibly have such knowledge. Vasubandhu replied that Buddha's omniscience is to be considered as a potential rather than an actualized state, dependent upon his attention or volition. Vasubandhu cited the example of a fire, which cannot burn everything at once, but has the ability to burn everything sequentially. Since Buddha has the ability to know everything, he is acknowledged to be omniscient. Thus Buddha's knowledge was regarded as having the same essential structure as the knowledge of ordinary people.

In opposition to this was the position of the *Mahāsāmghikas*, who held that Buddha's knowledge was qualitatively different from that of ordinary people. In the view typical of other Hīnayāna schools, consciousness existed moment by moment, flickering on and off like a movie. By the time a second moment arises, the first moment is completely gone. However, this made it difficult to establish causality operating over any space of time. The *Sarvāstivādins*, whose views Vasubandhu generally upholds in the *Kośa*,[18] asserted the existence of

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[17] Shared with Wittgenstein, whose own philosophical career embraces two distinct phases.

[18] At least in the verses. In the commentary he often seems to side more with the *Sautrāntikas*, as noted in S. Anacker, *Seven Works of Vasubandhu*, p. 17.

more than one moment; indeed, they claimed that both past and future existed just as much as the present. Their view was, as outlined above, similar to that of the *Milinda-pañha*, where Buddha's omniscience, functioning in much the same way as ordinary knowledge, is dependent upon volition for its activity. It is not automatic. The *Mahāsāmghikas* and others claimed that Buddha's omniscience was automatic. It was not dependent upon volition or any other factor, but was simply a result of his extreme mental purity. This assertion seems quite similar to that of the early Jainas mentioned above. The *Sarvāstivādins* maintained that Buddha's omniscience occurred over a period of two instants, one to cognize all phenomena and the other to render that cognition accessible. *Mahāsamghikas* rejected this, and said that since consciousness itself is self-luminous, there is no need of a second moment. This position was to become standard in later Mahāyāna discussions of this topic, and of the nature of the mind in general.

As mentioned above, Vasubandhu's career as a Buddhist philosopher spans the division between Hīnayānā and Mahāyāna, and so we find further discussions of omniscience in his later works. Of particular interest in this connection is the *Mahāyāna Sūtrālamkāra* (MSA), which along with the *Abhisamayālamkara* (AA) belongs to what are known as the "five texts of Maitreya." But when we examine the MSA, we find that its use of omniscience is quite different from that of the AA, which by itself would cast some serious doubt on the traditional ascription of these two texts to the same author. Let us proceed to the relevant textual citations. For the sake of analysis, we may divide them into two groups, first those that mention *sarvajña* (sj), and second those that mention *sarvākārajña* (saj). First we find Vasubandhu's commentary on MSA I. 15: "the path to omniscience [sj] is extremely difficult to penetrate." Here is a typical Buddhist or *Upaniṣadic* view of omniscience as a metaphor for enlightenment. Next is MSA IX.1–2: "After countless hundreds of ordeals, after countless harvests of births, and after countless destruction of blocks over immeasurable periods of time, omniscience [saj] is attained, unspoiled by (the slightest) block, like a casket of jewels thrown open, it is celebrated as Buddhahood." And in the commentary: "Buddhahood is presented from the point of view of achievement, nature, and a simile . . . Its nature is the attainment of omniscience [saj] unspoiled by any block." Here again omniscience is explicitly identified with Buddhahood or

enlightenment, as the removal of all obstacles or blocks to knowledge. Although the word used is *sarvâkārajñatā*, there is little to distinguish it from the previous *sarvajña*. For a final instance we may cite MSA XI. 2: "In brief, the Sutra, Vinaya, and Abhidharma have a fourfold etymology. When he knows them the sage obtains omniscience [saj]." And its commentary: "In brief, Sutra, Vinaya and Abhidharma are each fourfold in etymology; the bodhisattva who knows them obtains omniscience [sj]." Where the verse has *sarvâkārajñatā*, Vasubandhu explains this as *sarvajñatā*. This is the clearest evidence we have that he makes no significant distinction between these two key terms. And the meaning of omniscience is here reduced to a simple mastery of the traditional divisions of Buddhist literature. There are other quotes we could bring out here, but they would not affect the main point. The distinction at the heart of the AA between three different kinds of omniscience is unknown to Vasubandhu (at least at the time when he wrote this MSA commentary), and seems to be ignored by whomever composed the verses as well. The crucial middle term which links the *sarvajña* of the Hīnayānists with the *sarvâkārajña* of the Buddha in the AA is the *mārgajña* of the bodhisattvas, but this term does not occur even once in the MSA or Vasubandhu's commentary. This is a strong indication that the AA system was not formulated by the same person who was responsible for the MSA, and renders the traditional ascription of both of these texts to Maitreya extremely dubious. The designation of the "five Maitreya texts" is unknown in the earliest catalog of Tibetan translations from Sanskrit texts, which was compiled in 824.[19]

In passing, we may also note that this distinction between different types of omniscience is also unknown in the *Ratnagotra-vibhāga*, otherwise known as the *Uttara-tantra*, which is another one of the texts ascribed by the Tibetans to Maitreya. This text has been translated into English twice, first by Obermiller and more recently by Takasaki. Obermiller's translation was done from the Tibetan, but in the interval the Sanskrit text has been published by E. H. Johnston and Z. Nakamura.

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[19] See Hakamaya Noriaki, "Some Problems Concerning the Transmission and Appropriation of Yogācāra Buddhism in Tibet" (in Japanese) in *Journal of Oriental Science*, Vol. 21, No. 2 and Yoshimura Shūki, *The Denkar-ma, An Oldest Catalogue of the Tibetan Buddhist Canons* for this date as well as the observation about the absence of the Maitreya texts as such.

There are many references to Buddha's omniscience in this text as well, and the Sanskrit text reveals that the word used in this context is *sarvajña*. We shall cite one example, RGV II.42: "The Omniscience [*sarvajñatvaḥ*] of the Divine is That which is called the state of the Buddha, The Ultimate, Highest Nirvāṇa, The Buddha's inconceivable introspection."[20] Here again omniscience is said to be functionally equivalent to Buddhahood, a spiritual kind of omniscience, which is not distinguished from the word for omniscience which was in use in the Pāli scriptures. This is further evidence that the Tibetan ascription of these three texts (the AA, MSA, and RGV) to the same author is highly questionable. And insofar as *sarvākārajña* is not found in the RGV, it appears that the system of the AA was unknown to its author as well.

Omniscience in Later Mahāyāna

Following Vasubandhu by a few centuries is the career of the Buddhist logician Dharmakīrti, whose discussion of omniscience takes place partly in response to criticism from non-Buddhist sources, principally that of Kumārila, a *Mīmāṃsaka*.[21] In line with the famous salutation to the Buddha by Dignāga as "the embodiment of valid knowledge," Dharmakīrti's primary concern is to establish the credibility of Buddha's teachings. Thus he, like most other Buddhists, is not concerned with literal omniscience, but with a metaphorical or

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[20] E. E. Obermiller, trans., "The Sublime Science of the Great Vehicle to Salvation" in *Acta Orientalia* (1931), p. 252; Takasaki Jikidō *A Study on the Ratnagotravibhāga (Uttaratantra)*, p. 326; Nakamura Zuiryū *The Ratnagotravibhāga-Mahāyānottaratantra-Śāstra*, p. 167. I quote from Obermiller here because I prefer his English. Takasaki's version is: "That which is called Buddhahood Is the Omniscience of the Self-born, The highest Nirvāṇa, and the inconceivable Arhatship, Which is realized through self-introspection."

[21] This discussion has already received the attention of several scholars, such as Satkari Mookerjee, "The Omniscient as the Founder of a Religion" in *Nava Nālandā Mahāvihāra Research Publication*, Vol. II; E. A. Solomon, "The Problem of Omniscience (sarvajñatva)" in *Adyar Library Bulletin*, Vol. XXVI, Parts 1-2; and Kawasaki Shinjō "Proofs of the Existence of an Omniscient Person" (in Japanese) in *Epistemology and Logic, Lectures in Mahāyāna Buddhism*, Vol. 9. My presentation of this material simply consists of a recapitulation of their prior work.

spiritual type. However, first let us lay out Kumārila's arguments as our *pūrva-pakṣa*.

Kumārila, being a *Mīmāmsaka*, holds that all spiritual knowledge is derived from the Vedas exclusively. Thus any claims for other sources will meet with his disapproval. He states that a belief in an omniscient person is a mere superstition, not founded on or provable by any logical means. There is no means for knowing spiritual truth other than the Vedas. In the case of an expert chef, we may praise him by saying that he is omniscient with regard to cookery, and Kumārila will not object. Similarly in the case of philosophical systems which classify reality into a set number of categories. One who has studied those categories may feel that he knows everything, in a general way. But it is impossible that anyone could know literally everything. Even a single body has more atoms and particles in it than can be known by one person, not to speak of the entire universe. Furthermore, human sense organs are restricted to their particular objects. Claims of omniscience are as absurd as claiming that one can hear with one's nose, or see with one's ears. A person, such as our chef above, may be an expert in his chosen field, but this hardly implies that he knows anything at all outside of his specialty. There are certain limits to human ability. Through strenuous training, a man may be able to jump to a height of seven or eight feet, but no matter how much he practices, he will never be able to jump a mile high. Spiritual truths are simply inaccessible to human cognition without the assistance of the Vedas. Thus the Buddhist contention that their teacher knew such truths is simply mistaken. Any omniscient person would necessarily know a number of repellent and disgusting things, which any sane person would avoid. Claims of omniscience are based on testimony from the individuals concerned or from their followers, but the mere assertion does not make it so. Moreover, several different teachers have claimed (or been claimed) to be omniscient, yet they are unable to agree among themselves. This indicates that none of them are truly omniscient. Only an omniscient person can verify another's claim to be omniscient. The wise person will remain skeptical of all such claims. Omniscience, if it exists, is imperceptible, and cannot be proved by a syllogism, because there is no logical sign of omniscience which could establish its existence. Inference is always dependent upon perception. Thus the two main types of correct knowledge are ruled out. Nor is there anything similar to an omniscient

person, so his existence cannot be proved by analogy. Even if there were an omniscient person, he would retain his omniscience only as long as he was directly cognizing everything, which presumably would be some kind of meditative state. Upon emerging from such a trance, he would lose his omniscience. Some pious Buddhists declare that Buddha himself did not say anything, but his teaching proceeded automatically based on the needs of his individual followers, but this is quite unbelievable. The Buddha did indeed give spiritual instructions to his followers, but his teaching may be wrong. Further objections are attributed to Sāmaṭa and Yajñaṭa. Does an omniscient person know everything simultaneously or successively? If the former, one cognition would contain a multitude of contradictory qualities, which is impossible (or at least unprecedented) for human cognition. If the latter, it would take a very long time to know everything in the universe, during which such a person would most likely grow old and die. A knowledge of the general nature of all phenomena will not do, since it doesn't qualify as a knowledge of every particular thing. Also, such a knowledge could be false, and even if it were true, it would reduce particular diversity to an indistinguishable unity, in which there would be no distinctions such as teacher and pupil, right and wrong, etc. It may be said that the omniscient cognition is a special case, inaccessible to ordinary people, but this statement itself is unproven and merely begs the question.

The foregoing arguments are to be found in the *Tattvasamgraha*, a Buddhist work of the eighth century, which reports Kumārila's views in this case fairly and accurately. However, insofar as the above assertions constitute a *pūrva-pakṣa*, they are incomplete without their refutation. Dharmakīrti starts, as mentioned above, by denying literal omniscience for the Buddha. Kumārila's critique may have some force for Jainas, but not against a more limited form of omniscience. Claims that Buddha was omniscient mean that what he taught is verifiably correct, and more specifically that he is an expert when it comes to attaining liberation, *nirvāṇa*, or enlightenment. Knowledge of mundane details such as the number of insects in the world or the number of fish in the oceans is irrelevant.[22] The power of his physical vi-

[22] One is reminded here of the mention by Rabelais of "Mataeotechny—the Home of Useless Knowledge."

sion is beside the point. Even if he were able to see tiny objects miles away, this would give no indication of his abilities as a spiritual teacher. And if we make far-sightedness a criterion for a good teacher, let us all go learn from the eagle! Buddha was a perfect teacher, in that he knew all the details concerning liberation. He had not only the personal experience of his own enlightenment to inform the content of his discourse, but also the compassion for the suffering of others to provide his motivation. In this sense, then, he is the perfect teacher, praised as omniscient. Liberation results from the elimination of ignorance, so his teaching is accepted as authoritative. In his capacity as the supreme teacher, Buddha must also theoretically have access to mundane information as well, to be used in the context of teaching as the situation demands. And while it may not be possible to prove that such an omniscient person actually exists, it is no more possible to prove that such an existence is itself impossible. Dharmakīrti held the traditional Buddhist opinion that consciousness is luminous by nature, and that the various defilements and impurities which diminish its capacity are not essential but adventitious. Thus when consciousness is purified of all defilements, its capacity for knowledge should become infinite. Dharmakīrti's position on this issue is recognizably similar to that of the *Milinda-pañha*, and constitutes what has become the mainstream Buddhist interpretation of Buddha's omniscience.

Śāntarakṣita and his commentator Kamalaśīla give what is probably the most famous discussion of this problem[23] in their *Tattvasaṃgraha*, as mentioned above. In addition to the previous studies by Solomon, Mookerjee, and others, the entire *Tattvasaṃgraha* has been translated into English, rendering this discussion accessible to a much wider audience. Here we shall give only a few of the highlights of this fascinating discussion. In general, Śāntarakṣita says that the question of the existence of an omniscient person is open to doubt, and cannot be conclusively proven either way. Thus he criticizes the *Mīmāṃsaka*, saying: "If you deduce the incapacity of other persons, in regard to a certain effect, from your own example . . . then you land yourself in absurdities." The criterion of omniscience is stated as: "One is to be recognised as omniscient only when he has been found to satisfy all

[23] Solomon, p. 67: "The *Tattvasaṃgraha's* treatment of the concept of *sarvajña* is the best that we find in the whole range of Indian philosophical literature."

tests and all reasons, and has been found to have the true knowledge of all things." This test is rather stringent, and would require omniscience on the part of the judge as well. Yet Śāntaraksita's main concern is identical to that of Dharmakīrti: "What is primarily and directly understood by us is that there is a Person who knows the means of attaining Heaven and Liberation; —but not this alone; it is also believed that there is a Person who also knows *all* things." Thus Śāntarakṣita goes beyond Dharmakīrti's position in postulating the existence of someone with a literal omniscience. Of course, Buddha's status as the perfect teacher is the main issue, and here we find that the Buddhist doctrines are accepted as valid only after they have been critically analyzed. In this context the goldsmith quote occurs again. Thus Buddha's doctrines are said to withstand rational criticism, and for this reason Buddha is hailed as omniscient. It is otherwise in the case of teachers whose doctrines rely on their alleged omniscience. The quality of omniscience being non-perceptible (at least to non-omniscient people), its non-apprehension is no proof of its non-existence, it is at most an occasion for doubt. Yet since Buddhist doctrines are said to be established by logical proofs, omniscience is not regarded as the exclusive property of Śākyamuni. If other teachers propound doctrines which agree with what has been proven before, or can withstand logical analysis, Śāntarakṣita is willing to acknowledge their omniscience as well. Insofar as they understand the true nature of reality, they are Buddhas. Omniscience results from the elimination of all obscurations and hindrances to cognition, as in Jainism. In this way omniscience is not caused as much as it is revealed or uncovered. Śantarakṣita says that an omniscient person perceives everything directly through his mind, which ordinarily correlates the data from the senses, operates the memory, and so forth. Thus his knowledge is taken to be similar to ordinary knowledge, only carried to its limit by the repeated practice of meditation. For Śāntarakṣita as for Dharmakīrti, consciousness is luminous by nature, and removing obscurations reveals its luminosity and increases its potential all the way to omniscience. "As a matter of fact, there is no limit to the knowledge of man." In asserting that a "single clear appearance of all things in a single cognition is quite possible," Śāntarakṣita blurs one of the major distinctions made by (or for) Śākyamuni in the *Kannakatthala Sutta*. The assertion that a "single cognition comprehends all that is knowable" follows the position of

the *Mahāsaṃghikas*. In fact, Śāntarakṣita wants to have it both ways: "Whatever He wishes to know He comes to know it without fail; —such is His power, as He has shaken off all evil. He knows things either simultaneously or in succession, just as He wishes," thus conflating the two kinds of omniscience which were so carefully distinguished by Śākyamuni for King Pasenadi above.

The problem of omniscience was a perennial concern in later Mahāyāna philosophy, as evidenced in the works of Jñānaśrīmitra, Ratnakīrti, and Mokṣākaragupta, but their treatment of this issue adds very little to that of Kamalaśīla. Two kinds of omniscience are distinguished, first and more important a spiritual or figurative omniscience which is equated with *dharmajña*, especially knowledge of the four truths, and only secondarily a literal kind of omniscience, which is much harder to prove, and receives only cursory treatment. The former is regarded as the natural result of developing one's mental function through repeated meditation. Both Ratnakīrti and Mokṣākaragupta use the same example, that of the image of a girl which clearly appears to her lover based on his intense passion for her. Substituting the Buddhist four truths for the girl gives us their idea of omniscience. Ratnakīrti defines this kind of figurative omniscience as the capability of a mental function to become distinct, following the example of his teacher Jñānaśrīmitra, who defines it as the knowledge of what is to be avoided and what is to be obtained which functions clearly in a great variety of situations.[24] This idea is a long way from literal omniscience. Literal omniscience receives scant attention from Ratnakīrti, although he does make a perfunctory effort to prove it as well. Here we will give Mokṣākaragupta's proof: "Words agreeing with a proof and having a definite object presuppose directly or indirectly the knowledge intuiting that object, as e.g. the words 'fire burns'; The words 'all produced things are momentary' also agree with a proof and have definite objects; [therefore, the words presuppose the knowledge intuiting all

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[24] Quoted by Ratnakīrti in Bühnemann, *Der Allwissende Buddha, Ein Beweis und seine Probleme. Ratnakīrti's Sarvajñasiddhi übersetzt und kommentiert*, p. 12. Also see E. Steinkellner's article in L. Lancaster, ed., *Prajñāpāramitā and Related Systems*, p. 387 (quoting Jñānaśrīmitra): "Through the force of such training it is possible that a kind of mental function, which is characterized by matters to be obtained, to be avoided, and their kinds, becomes distinctly manifest as referring to the greatest number of totally clear (individual) life-situtations. Only this we consider as omniscience."

things, i.e. there must be an all-knowing person.]" This so-called proof is hardly convincing, and its very weakness is an indication of the relative unimportance it was accorded by Buddhist philosophers.

Grandiose as the conception of literal omniscience is, it is not yet the last word in Buddhist philosophy. In later Mahāyāna,[25] ideas of the Buddha become even more fabulous, such that Buddha's "eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mental consciousnesses are each omniscient. Thus, a single moment of any consciousness cognizes all phenomena."[26] For example, according to this idea, Buddha's knee is able to hear, see, smell, taste, and feel all phenomena in the universe all the time, which takes the concept of omniscience about as far as it can go. By this time Buddha has become a god, or the god above the gods, and his followers, conveniently overlooking his earlier warnings, quite happily describe him in terms that far surpass their own experience.

Summary

We find that the concept of omniscience in Buddhist philosophy gives us a way of understanding the development of Buddhism within India. From examining the issues connected with this term we can easily discern a tendency within Buddhism to exalt the abstract at the expense of the concrete. To begin with, Śākyamuni was noticeably uncomfortable with any claims for omniscience, made about either him or others. His concern was much more matter-of-fact, dealing with ordinary experience and statements that could be made on that basis alone. However, soon after his death, we find that statements were attributed to him which begin to open the door for claims by later Buddhists to be following an omniscient teacher. This is the natural outcome of early Buddhists wishing to uphold the superiority of their own teacher and his doctrine in the face of rival claims to omniscience which were quite specific. Yet throughout the early period, at least, Buddha's omniscience does not go beyond the nature of ordinary knowledge, although it does represent the development of such knowledge to its limit. With the development of the Mahāyāna, the figure

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[25] Shading over into Tantra, although Hopkins typically gives no specific source for the following quote.

[26] Jeffrey Hopkins, *Meditation on Emptiness*, p. 120.

of the human Śākyamuni is lost, replaced by a divinized and cosmic Buddha who is vastly superior to all other creatures. Even Buddha's omniscience must become a super-omniscience to be worthy of this exalted being. Bridging the gap between such an abstractly conceived super-godlike figure and the ordinary individual is the figure of the bodhisattva. Yet throughout this development, Buddhist philosophers consistently maintain that omniscience in Buddhism is not to be understood literally, or that at least this is not the primary sense in which Buddha is said to be omniscient. Buddha is omniscient by virtue of his perfect knowledge of the methods and techniques for spiritual liberation, which find expression in his teachings. That this is to be distinguished from literal omniscience is also indicated by Tucci, Conze, Suzuki, and other translators as well, who render "*sarvajñatā*" not as "omniscience," although this is the obvious choice, but by the somewhat cumbersome "All-knowledge." This may perhaps be due to their desire to avoid the theological overtones of "omniscience" within Christian cultures.

Yet the later distinction between *sarvajña* and *sarvâkārajña* can be a useful one for classifying Buddhist scriptures. Without knowing precisely when the latter term was first introduced, we can nevertheless notice which texts make use of it and which do not. This is a task for another occasion, but here we can note that it has been useful to us in criticizing the Tibetan tradition of the five Maitreya texts. Since *sarvâkārajña* is an odd term found especially in the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra in 25,[illegible] Lines* and the *Abhisamayālaṃkāra*, we can use it to distinguish which texts are associated with them.