

Is Buddha Omniscient? A Debate within Theravāda Buddhism

Bertram G. Liyanage¹

Introduction

The term ‘omniscience’ from Latin *omnis* (all) + *sciens* (present participle of *scire*, to know) imparts the meaning ‘all-knowing.’ Literally, *sarvajña* (Skt.), *sabbaññū*, *sabbavidū* (Pāli) carry the same connotation. One who has acquired omniscience, by definition, must have possessed the knowledge of everything, including past, present and future. This character of knowledge, though popularised by medieval theologians regarding God, was not altogether alien to early Buddhist texts. Sakuludāyin, for instance, reported to Buddha that “[v]enerable sir, in recent days there was one claiming to be omniscient and all-seeing, to have complete knowledge and vision: ‘Whether I am walking or standing or sleeping or awake, knowledge and vision is continuously and uninterruptedly present to me.’” Sutta itself ascribes this statement to Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta (MN 79). This paper attempts to identify the Theravāda standpoint of claiming Buddha omniscience.

Research Objective/s

Whether ‘omniscience’ can be attributed to Buddha is an age-old question for all Buddhist traditions, including Theravāda Buddhism. Most of the early Buddhist Suttas reveal that Buddha can be called ‘omniscient’ only in a restricted sense. Some Suttas, nevertheless, like Kāḷaka Sutta (AN) or Pāṭika Sutta (DN) would have been interpreted in two possible ways; one is for justifying the attribution of omniscience to Buddha. Later on, we find Mahāsaṃghika and Vaibhāṣika traditions unequivocally attribute this epithet to Buddha. In Mahāniddeśa (Nidd I 130), we find similar extolment of the omniscience of Buddha as “[w]hether past, future, or present, all phenomena in all modes enter the range of the Blessed One’s portal of knowledge...” The **objective of this paper** is not, however, focusing on chronological and sectarian development of the omniscient concept, but on the questions, whether early Buddhism supports constant and continuous omniscient knowledge and, provided that such knowledge is impossible to achieve by human beings, how early discourses can be construed in a consistent framework avoiding apparent discrepancies.

¹. Deputy Editor of Encyclopaedia of Buddhism. liyanagebg@gmail.com

Research Methodology

My focus will be on studying all available sources pertaining to the early Buddhist texts, including Theravāda commentaries, where I can find a good treatment of the issue, that is, attributing omniscience to Buddha. Then I shall make a list of philosophical questions they ought to ask themselves while delineating this concept, and then I examine to what extent they have attempted to answer them. Finally, calculating all possible interpretations for a given discourse on the matter, I shall suggest a framework for maintaining coherence and consistency among divergent suttas.

Research Problem/s

According to Tevijjavaccagotta Sutta (MN 71) and Kaṇṇakatthala Sutta (MN 90), we are prompted to bifurcate the aforesaid statement of ‘omniscience’ as (A) omniscient and all-seeing, to have complete knowledge and vision and (B) whether it is present to him/her at all times and continuously. Two discourses jointly say that Buddha rejects section B, but not section A, which is further to be understood that Buddha said to be omniscient in the restricted sense, such that he is omniscient but his omniscience is not present to him at all times. The first and foremost issue regarding the omniscience of Buddha arises here how omniscience becomes present at one moment and disappears at another moment. Apart from this, how Buddha’s knowledge functions to cognise past and future will be of my primary concern. Particularly medieval ‘classical criticism’ of omniscience and future knowing paradox cannot be evasive in this context, that is, knowing the future will accept determinism indirectly.

Research Literature Review

Venerable Anālayo’s (2006) study, “Buddha and Omniscience” is the most recent on the topic and he has collected many sources too, but his approach is not to provide a philosophical discussion or conclusion on the topic. Nāgapriya has asked the same question by his paper “Was Buddha Omniscience?” and points out that both early texts and later philosophers like Dharmakīrti do not accept the omniscience of Buddha in the sense that it is present to him all time. Kher (1972) holds the same view. Jaini’s (2001) contribution is also notable from two *śramaṇa* movements, Buddhism and Jainism, which sheds a light on early Buddhist textual interpretation in comparison with authentic Jaina sources on ‘omniscience.’ Professor Endo (2002) has collected and analysed commentarial interpretations of Buddha’s knowledge in

Chapter II of his work, explaining the omniscience of Buddha. I have used several other works to have a thoroughgoing understanding of the ‘omniscience’ concept from different Buddhist schools. They all are mentioned in the Reference section. For primary materials, I have used the PTS edition of Pāli Tipiṭaka and Bhikkhu Bodhi’s translations.

Research Framework

Here the research framework is pellucid as the whole research rotates around early Buddhist Pāli texts and their commentarial interpretations. Occasionally there will be some digressions to an enlightening comparison of non-Theravāda texts. First, I shall present a definition of omniscience as available in early texts and then the philosophical issues related to that position. Following, some other issues that must be clarified epistemologically to investigate the validity of attributing ‘omniscience’ to Buddha.

Research Discussion

Milindapañho, a late canonical text, directly addresses this issue and clarifies that Buddha’s omniscience is ‘dependent on adverting’ (*āvajjanapaṭibaddham*). This interpretation seems to be the best explanation to overcome the issue at hand. However, this would account for, “the omniscient knowledge of the Tathāgata may lack the smallest degree of adverting.” This interpretation of Milindpañho is, further, fortified by corroborative evidence of Brahmāyācana Sutta (SN) and Janavasabha Sutta (DN 18). Both suttas testify that unless Buddha adverts his mind, he ‘does not know’ the given fact. For example, in Brahmāyācana Sutta Buddha was reluctant to teach Dhamma as it will be tiresome for him. Sahampati Brahma, at that time, knowing Buddha’s thought invites him to preach the Dhamma pointing out that there are some who would be able to understand the Dhamma. Afterwards, Buddha adverts his mind and knows that Brahma is right, which changes his mind to teach the Dhamma. There are two incidents in Kāligodhā Sutta (SN) and Dhammadinna Sutta (SN), where Buddha did not know that the listener is in stream-entry level and taught Dhamma to fit with that level. In these both cases, *suttas* do not refer to Buddha’s adverting before preaching.

At this point, it is conspicuous that as long as Buddha did not advert his mind to know something, **he did not know** it, because literally the verb ‘know’ is applied only referring to the past. When somebody states “I know medical science” it supposes that the speaker was possessing that knowledge before the utterance of this assertion. Someone cannot use the verb

‘know’ referring to his intention or ability to cognise something in the future. Yet, later commentarial texts use an additional word *manasikārapaṭibaddha*, dependent on recollection, along with *āvajjanapaṭibaddha*, which presumes that ‘knowledge’ is already present to him and he only desires to ‘recall’ the point at hand. In Paṭisambhidāmaggaṭṭhakathā there is a thought-provoking clarification of five types of omniscience, of them, *ñātasabbaññū* (omniscience which is ‘known’) is applied to Buddha, for there is nothing in the world that Buddha did not see. This explanation would induce a reader to construe Simṣapā Sutta (SN) as Buddha’s indication of his omniscience, where Buddha remarks that whatever he taught is smaller in quantity as the fist of leaves taken by hand than whatever he did not teach, but known, which is as enormous as the leaves in the forest. This interpretation, however, can be straightforwardly objected by the counterexample of Brahmāyācana Sutta. We shall have to interpret, therefore, that Simṣapā Sutta conveys its literal significance that Buddha, knowing much, has taught comparatively less. Once more, the commentarial introduction of Buddha’s ‘Attainment of Great Compassion’ (*mahākaruṇāsamapatti*) is also incompatible with this view, on the basis that if Buddha already knows everything, he has no reason to advert his mind through meditation to know subjects worthy to realise Dhamma and to be helped for such acquisitions. ‘Attainment of Great Compassion,’ on the other hand, can be rightly understood in line with Buddha’s ‘adverting knowledge.’ Moreover, the five knowable tracks (*pañca neyyāpatha*) in the above-mentioned Paṭisambhidāmaggaṭṭhakathā would indicate that Buddha has already known what is philosophically pertinent to his metaphysics, otherwise not all, but the statement may have alternative interpretation.

Kāḷaka Sutta (AN) is, perhaps, the most striking counterexample to the discussion thus far. In this Sutta, Buddha explicitly expresses that he has direct knowledge “in this world with its devas, Māra, and Brahmā, among this population with its ascetics and brahmins, its devas and humans, whatever is seen, heard, sensed, cognised, reached, sought after, examined by the mind.” This sutta, in fact, indicates ‘all-knowing’ by its content, surprisingly, without using the word ‘all.’ This would be a clear-cut reference to Sabba Sutta (SN) where Buddha has defined the meaning of ‘all’ as he is intended so that Buddha’s knowledge is functioning within the range of ‘cognition.’ Complimentarily it provides the ground to Kāḷaka Sutta to understand ‘sabba’ (all) to be meant including the range of all other beings, which means, in plain words, Buddha knows all that others know. The account of Milindapañho also explains the same in different terms. It is

likewise notable that both Kāḷaka Sutta or Sabba Sutta has no explicit reference to knowing all three times.

Next comes the question whether Buddha can know three times, past, present and future, with a special kind of knowledge. Paṭisambhidāmagga and many commentaries assert that Buddha possesses such knowledge and, in addition, there is no obstacle to Buddha's recollection of past and adverting future, which is *anāvaraṇañāṇa*, a property of omniscience. In Tevijjavacchagotta Sutta and in many other occurrences Buddha does emphasise three types of knowledge, viz., recollection of past lives, divine eye and destructions of all defilements. Of these, the first two belong to omniscience and they are the widely accepted pieces of knowledge to determine past and future. However, in the discourses, we find numerous repetitions of the same description saying that with the knowledge of recollection past lives, someone, even Buddha, can recollect his/her own past lives, not of others and the divine eye is not the ability to see the future but the death and reappearing of the beings related to the past and immediate death of the present life. This latter knowledge is not to see continuous future rebirths. Forecasting future destiny of someone arises the well-known paradox of determinism, which would collapse all the edifice of Buddhism. There are some exceptions, however, like Pāṭika Sutta of DN (24) which explains Buddha's miraculous power to forecast the future. In many other suttas, we find more realistically that Buddha can forecast about beings only when they are karmically destined (*yathā kammūpagā*). With Mahāsīhanāda Sutta (MN 12), we have no warrant to infer that Buddha's teaching is founded on purely inferential knowledge without taking in any extraordinary knowledge. Pāṭika Sutta, all the same, does not explicitly say that Buddha's ability to forecasting based on his ability to know future.

Research Conclusion

Though Buddha calls himself omniscient (*sabbavidū*, Mahāvahggapāḷi) and though later commentarial literature following Paṭisambhidāmagga makes extraordinary account on Buddha's omniscience, there is no solid ground in early texts, including Milindapañho, to infer that the epithet 'omniscience' is attributed to Buddha in the sense that he knows everything at all times. Moreover, in Brahmāyu Sutta (MN 91) when Buddha identifies himself as 'Buddha' he states that "what must be known, I've directly known" (*abhiññeyyaṃ abhiññātaṃ*) indicating that he knew not all, but 'what must be known.' Though some discourses sound advocating continuous

and ever-present omniscience of Buddha, scrutinising them we can find a consistent logical framework for apparently discrepant views, proving that early Buddhist discourses reject such omniscience regarding Buddha. This is the logical reason for later philosophers like Dharmakīrti to understand that Buddha is deserved to be called omniscient in the sense that he knows all materials that he teaches in every possible way (*sarvapaḍārthānāṃ sarvākāradarśanam*).

Research Suggestion/s (If any)

With this overall research, I think that in case of the qualified sense of omniscience is proved, Theravāda Buddhist followers must know the truth, and these research studies must get down to grass level from university discussion forums. Otherwise, there will be two variants of Buddhism, one is exclusively for academics and the other for man in the street.

Keywords: Buddha, Omniscient, Theravāda Buddhism, sutta

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