

The Buddha's 10 powers

Source: *(Māra) Kin Nu Sīha Sutta* (S 4.12, SD 61.26), Is there others who can teach like the Buddha? © Piya Tan, 2024.¹

2.3.2 The Buddha's 10 powers

2.3.2.0 We will here list the Buddha's 10 powers, also called the Tathagata's 10 powers, briefly with a few examples or explanatory notes.² **The Vibhanga**, in its explanation on the tens (*dasaka niddesa*), chapter 16, titled "analysis of knowledge" (*ñāṇa, vibhaṅga*), gives detailed definitions of each of the 10 powers. The explanations here are given concisely or paraphrased following the sutta teachings.³

(1) The Tathagata truly understands **what is possible** (*tṭhāna*), **what is impossible** (*aṭṭhāna*).⁴

It is impossible that someone with right view would regard any conditioned thing as being *permanent, pleasant* or *as an abiding soul*. But it is possible that a worldly person may regard any conditioned thing as being so.

It is impossible that bad karma of body, speech or mind would produce karmic results that are desirable, agreeable, pleasant. It is possible that good karma of body, speech or mind would produce karmic results that are desirable, agreeable, pleasant.

In what follows the Vibhaṅga lists impossibilities, some of which would today be labelled as Buddhist "dogmas," for example, it is impossible:

that anyone with right view will kill a parent or an arhat, or draw blood from the Buddha, or create a schism in the sangha;

that there may be more than one fully awakened buddha in the same universe at the same time;⁵

that a woman will be a fully awakened buddha, a wheel-turner, Sakra, Māra or Brahma;⁶

that bad karma of mind, speech or body will fruit in *real*⁷ desirable and pleasant results, including rebirth in happy planes;

that good karma of mind, speech or body will not bring undesirable or unpleasant results, including rebirth in happy planes;

that a doer of good karma of mind, speech or body will arise in a suffering state.

¹ <https://www.themindingcentre.org/dharmafarer/wp-content/uploads/61.26-Mara-Kin-Nu-Siha-S-s4.12-piya.pdf>

² Based on Pm 2:174-176; Vbh 335-344 (see prec n).

³ The definitions, especially the later ones, follow the Abhidhamma tradition, which may sound dogmatic in their manner of presentation, which seems less flexible than the sutta teachings. They are best discussed with an experienced teacher.

⁴ These "impossibilities" listed here form their own ch 15, entitled **Aṭṭhāna** in the Book of Ones of the Aṅguttara (A 1.268-295/1:26-30). Many of these are found in **Bahu, dhātuka S** (M 115, 12-19/3:64-67), SD 29.1a.

⁵ This is actually more a matter of natural necessity than of possibility. The point here is not about an individual but more so regarding the veracity and singularity of the teaching that the Buddha discovers and teaches.

⁶ In the case of the "great man" (who either becomes Buddha or the wheel-turner) this has to do more with social conditions than patriarchy; in the case of the higher beings, I think, it is a matter of asexuality of the gods (since they are not of the sense-world that we inhabit).

⁷ I have added this caveat because the evil-doer often seems to derive pleasure from an evil deed.

(2) The Tathagata truly understands **the result of past, future and present actions that one acquires** along with their causes and possibilities (*atītānāgata, paccuppannānaṃ kamma, samādānaṃ ṭhāṇaso hetuso vipākaṃ*).

A bad karma may not fruit because of a good birth (*gaiti*), good karmic conditions (*upadhi*), right time (*kāla*), or right effort [means] (*payoga*); similarly, a bad karma may fruit because of a bad birth, bad karmic conditions, wrong time, or wrong effort.

On the other hand, a good karma may not fruit because of a bad birth, bad karmic conditions, wrong time, or wrong effort. Similarly, a good karma may fruit because of a good birth, good karmic conditions, right time, or right effort.

(3) The Tathagata truly understands **the destinies of all the paths of practice** (*sabbattha, gāminim paṭipadaṃ*).

The Buddha understands the path or the practice that brings one to the hells, to the animal world, to the preta plane, to the human world, or to the deva realm.

(4) The Tathagata truly understands **the worlds in terms of their many and different elements** (*aneka, dhātuṃ nānā, dhātuṃ lokaṃ*).

The Buddha understands the various worlds (*loka, nanatta*) in terms of their various aggregates (*āyatana, nanatta*) (form, feeling, perception, formations and consciousness) and their various elements (*dhātu, natatta*) (earth, water, fire, wind, and space).⁸

(5) The Tathagata truly understands **the different dispositions of beings** (*sattānaṃ nānā' dhimuttika-taṃ*).

The Buddha understands that there are beings of inferior disposition, and there are beings of superior [refined] dispositions. Beings of like disposition tend to approach, associate, depend on like beings. This was the situation in the past, and this will be the situation in the future.

(6) The Tathagata truly understands **the degree of development of the faculties of various beings, various individuals** (*para, sattānaṃ oara, puggalānaṃ indriya, paropariyattaṃ*).

The Buddha understands beings and individuals according to their inclination, their latent tendency, their character, their disposition. He understands beings with little dust in their eyes, with much dust in their eyes, with sharp faculties, with dull faculties, with good character, with bad character, easy to teach, difficult to teach, capable, incapable.

By inclination (*āsaya*) is meant that they have views such as the world is eternal or not eternal; the world is finite or infinite; the body and self (soul) are the same, or they are different; after death, a being exists, or does not, or both, or neither.

By latent tendency (*anusaya*) is meant that they are reactive by way of lust or repulsion or conceit or view or doubt or lust for existence (eternal life) or ignorance.

By character (*carita*) is meant whether one is weakly grounded or deeply grounded in merits or in demerits or in the imperturbable (this last conduces to rebirth in the formless states).

By disposition (*adhimutti*) is meant whether one is drawn to inferior people (with bad karmic habits) or to superior people (with good karmic habits).

Those “with much dust in their eyes” (*mahā, raj'akkha*) have any of these 10 defilements: greed, hatred, delusion, conceit, views, doubt, sloth, restlessness, lack of moral shame, lack of moral fear. Such persons are narcissistic (*ussada, gata*); hence, they are difficult to counsel or teach.

⁸ See also **Sabba S** (35.23/4:15), SD 7.1.

Those “with little dust in their eyes” (*appa’raj’akkha*) have few and little of the 10 defilements; hence, they are not narcissistic and are easy to teach.

Those “with sharp faculties” (*tikkh’indriya*) means that they are strong in one or more of the 5 faculties: faith, effort, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom.

“With dull faculties” (*mud’indriya*) means their spiritual faculties are all weak.

“With good character” (*svākāra*) means that they have good inclinations, fine character, good disposition, little dust in their eye, and sharp faculties. Such persons are also “easy to teach” (*suviññāpaya*).

“With bad character” (*dvākāra*) means that they have bad inclinations, latent tendencies, evil character, bad disposition, much dust in their eye, and weak faculties. Such persons are also “difficult to teach” (*dviññāpaya*).

Those who are “incapable or unfit” (*abhabba*) are obstructed by their karma, karmic fruits or defilements; they have no faith, no desire to do good, no wisdom, no certainty of any wholesome state to bring them to the path.

The “capable or fit” (*bhabba*) are free from obstruction by way of karma, defilements or karmic fruits. They have faith, desire to do good, wisdom, the certainty of a wholesome state to bring them to the path.

(7) The Tathagata truly understands **the corruption of, the purification of, and emergence from dhyana, liberation, concentration and attainment** (*jhana, vimokkha, samādhi, samāpatti*).

There are 3 tetrads of meditators here:

The 1st tetrad. One having actually attained dhyana thinks he has failed, and one who knows that he has attained it. One not having attained dhyana, thinks that he has, and one who knows that he has not.

The 2nd tetrad. One who attains dhyana slowly but emerges quickly; one who attains it quickly but emerges slowly; one who attains it slowly and emerges slowly; and one who attains it quickly and emerges quickly.

The 3rd tetrad. In dhyana, one is skillful in concentrating but not in maintaining it; one not skillful in attaining concentration but skillful in maintaining it; one who is skilled neither; one who is skilled in both.

Here, **dhyana** (*jhāna*) refers to the 4 form dhyanas.

Liberation (*vimokkha*) means that the 8 liberations,⁹ as follows:

- (1) One with physical form, sees physical forms internally.
- (2) One, not seeing physical form internally, sees physical forms externally.
- (3) One is freed after contemplating on the idea of the beautiful (*subha*).¹⁰
- (4) Transcending from sense-impingement (*paṭigha*), and non-attention to the perception of diversity, contemplating, “Space is infinite,” one attains and dwells in the base of infinite space.
- (5) Transcending infinite space, contemplating, “Consciousness is infinite,” one enters and dwells in the base of infinite consciousness.
- (6) Transcending infinite consciousness, contemplating, “There is nothing,” one enters and dwells in the base of nothingness.
- (7) Transcending the base of nothingness, one enters and dwells in the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception.
- (8) Transcending the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception, one enters and dwells in the cessation of perception and feeling.¹¹

⁹ See SD 5.17 (10); SD 49.5b (3).

¹⁰ Like a pure bright colour (*kaṣiṇa*): **Mahā,parinibbāna S** (D 16,3.29-32), SD 9; SD 15.1 (9.2).

¹¹ Cessation requires both concentration and insight, and can be attained only by non-returners and arhats who have mastered the formless attainments.

Concentration (*samādhī*) means the 3 kinds of concentration:

- (1) concentration accompanied by initial application and sustained application;
- (2) concentration accompanied without initial application, but with sustained application only;
- (3) concentration accompanied with neither initial application nor sustained application.

Attainment (*samāpatti*) means dwelling in the 9 progressive abodes (*nava anupubba, vihāra*), that is, the 4 form dhyanas, the 4 formless attainments and cessation of perception and feeling.

Corruption (*saṃkilesa*) refers to a state of decline (in the meditation).

- (8) The Tathagata truly understands **the recollection of past lives** (*pubbe, nivāsānussati*).

Here the Buddha is able to recall hundreds of thousands of (his own) births, over many world-cycles during its evolving, stable and devolving stages,¹² knowing his habitat (place), name, clan, complexion, food, experience of pleasure and pain, lifespan, and rebirth.

With this knowledge, he understands his own personal development in terms of rebirth.

- (9) The Tathagata truly understands **the passing away and rebirth of beings** (*sattānaṃ cutūpapāta*).

With his superhuman divine eye (power of retrocognition), the Buddha is able to see beings passing away, arising, inferior, superior, of good complexion, of bad complexion, happy, miserable. He comprehends how these are the result of their own karma of body, speech and mind. He saw how they held wrong views, scoffing at the noble ones, acting with wrong views, and after death arising in suffering states, in the hells.

Again, he sees worthy beings with good karma of body, speech and mind, not scoffing at the noble ones, having right views, acting with right views, and after death, arising in happy heavenly world.

With this knowledge, he understands how beings evolve according to their karma.

- (10) The Tathagata truly understands **the destruction of the influxes** (*āsavānaṃ khayam*).¹³

Here, the Buddha, by the destruction of the influxes (*āsava*)—sensual desires, existence, views and ignorance—having himself fully known and realized in the present life, attains and dwells in the freedom of mind, the freedom of wisdom that is influx-free. This is his knowledge of the destruction of the influxes (*āsava-k, khaya, ñāṇa*) (which makes him an arhat and fully awakened buddha).

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¹² The Pali actually says: “during many evolving aeons ... devolving aeons ... evolving and devolving aeons ... (*aneke pi saṃvatta, kappe ... vivaṭṭa, kappe ... saṃvatta, vivatta, kappe*).

¹³ These last 3 knowledges—nos. 7-10—also form the famous “3 knowledges” (*te, vijja*) of the arhats: **Te, vijja S** (D 13) + SD 1.8 (2.2.2); **Cūḷa Hatthi, padôpama S** (M 27, 23-25), SD 40.5.