

Thermal conductivity of single-crystal brucite at high pressures: Implications for thermal anomaly in the shallow lower mantle

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ABSTRACT

Brucite [Mg(OH)₂] is an important hydrous mineral in the MgO-SiO₂-H₂O system and also a key component in the process of hydrothermal metamorphism. Due to its large water storage capacity and presence within a sinking slab, the study of brucite's physical properties under relevant extreme conditions could shed new light on its potential impacts on the slab's thermal profile and geodynamics, as well as seismic anomaly observed around a subduction zone. For example, seismic tomography has revealed slab stagnation and low-velocity zones in the shallow lower mantle that is conventionally attributed, respectively, to large contrasts of physical properties between the slab and mantle as well as dehydration melt. However, the effect of hydrous minerals on slab dynamics and seismic anomalies remains poorly understood. Here we study thermal conductivity of brucite at high pressures and room temperature as well as at ambient pressure and elevated temperatures. We further model thermal conductivity of brucite along a representative geotherm and find an ~6-fold to 19-fold increase in the thermal conductivity as brucite decomposes to periclase in the shallow lower mantle (~800 km depth). This result implies that the subduction and decomposition of brucite-rich aggregate within a slab may create a local high-temperature anomaly that would both enhance the slab's buoyancy, leading to stagnation, and facilitate dehydration melting, contributing to seismic low-velocity zones. Our findings offer mechanisms associated with brucite decomposition that could influence the slab dynamics and seismic structures in the shallow lower mantle.

Keywords: Brucite, hydrous mineral, anisotropic thermal conductivity, slab stagnation, dehydration melting; Physics and Chemistry of Earth's Deep Mantle and Core

INTRODUCTION

Brucite is one of the key hydrous phases in the complex MgO-SiO₂-H₂O (MSH) ternary system (Hacker et al. 2003; Ohtani et al. 1995, 2000). It contains large amounts of water (~30 wt%) and can coexist with other hydrous minerals, e.g., phase D, at pressure-temperature (*P-T*) conditions within a subducting slab at mantle transition zone and top of lower mantle (Irifune et al. 1998; Nishi et al. 2014; Ohtani et al. 1995, 2000). The presence of brucite in Earth's deep interior could play a crucial role in affecting Earth's deep water circulation and water budget. In the past decades, many physical properties of brucite under extreme conditions have been extensively investigated, including: (1) phase stability (Fukui et al. 2005; Hacker et al. 2003; Hermann and Mookherjee 2016; Nishi et al. 2014; Pawley and Wood 1996); (2) elastic properties and seismic velocities (Hermann and Mookherjee 2016; Jiang et al. 2006; Mainprice and Ildefonse 2009); (3) crystal structure and equation of state (Catti et al. 1995; Hermann and Mookherjee 2016; Mookherjee and Stixrude 2006; Nagai et al. 2000; Parise et al. 1994; Rauegi et al. 1999; Xia et al. 1998); (4) molecular vibrational spectrum (Duffy et al. 1995;

Kruger et al. 1989; Zhu et al. 2019); and (5) thermal properties (Hofmeister 2014; Horai 1971; Saxena et al. 1993; Zhu et al. 2019). Importantly, using structure search and ab initio calculations, Hermann and Mookherjee (2016) predicted that brucite is stable along the *P-T* conditions of a subducting slab until about 30 GPa (~800 km depth), after which it decomposes to periclase (MgO) and H₂O. The stability of brucite would impact the relative stability of other minerals in the MSH system (Hacker et al. 2003; Ohtani et al. 1995, 2000). Potentially the drastic changes in physical properties across brucite's decomposition to periclase and H₂O could trigger local seismic and geodynamic anomalies [see Hermann and Mookherjee (2016) and our discussion below].

Lattice thermal conductivity, the ability of a material to conduct heat, of minerals in the mantle and subducting slabs is crucial to control the thermal evolution and geodynamics in Earth's interior (Chang et al. 2017; Dalton et al. 2013; Deschamps and Hsieh 2019; Hsieh et al. 2017, 2018, 2020; Marzotto et al. 2020). Recent studies suggested that a temperature anomaly within a subducting slab could be induced by large variations of thermal conductivity in the oceanic crust due to, for instance, the effect of hydration (Chang et al. 2017) or spin transition (Chao and Hsieh 2019; Hsieh et al. 2020). Since brucite could coexist with phase D in the peridotitic layer of a subducting slab, yet decompose to periclase in the shallow lower mantle, how its

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† Special collection papers can be found online at <http://www.minsocam.org/MSA/AmMin/special-collections.html>.

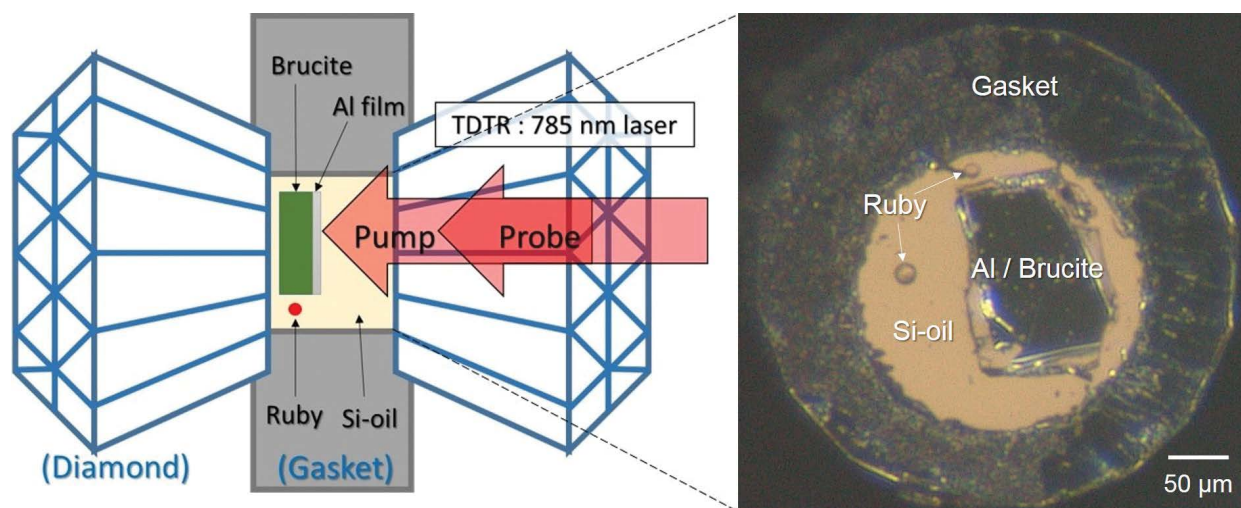


FIGURE 1. Schematic illustration of the optical pump-probe measurements coupled with a diamond-anvil cell (left panel), and an optical microscopic image of the brucite within the diamond-anvil cell (right panel). The brucite sample is coated with an Al thin film that serves as a transducer to absorb heat from the pump beam and to enable measurements of temperature through changes in optical reflectivity. The pressure medium is silicone oil. The pressure is measured by ruby fluorescence. (Color online.)

thermal conductivity changes across the decomposition could critically influence the local temperature profile, the stability of other hydrous minerals, and dynamics of slabs. Prior studies on the brucite thermal conductivity have been limited to polycrystalline or powder samples (Hofmeister 2014; Horai 1971; Yagi et al. 2010). However, at ambient conditions brucite is a layered crystal ($P\bar{3}$ symmetry) with large elastic anisotropy (Hermann and Mookherjee 2016). Knowledge of the thermal conductivity of brucite along different crystal orientations under extreme conditions is critically needed as it could offer novel insights into the thermal profiles of a slab and ambient mantle, with important consequences on slab's subduction dynamics and route of water cycle in the shallow lower mantle.

In this work, we coupled ultrafast time-domain thermoreflectance with diamond-anvil cells (DAC) to study the lattice thermal conductivity of brucite along a -axis ([100]) and c -axis ([001]) of the crystal to 30 GPa. We observed a strong thermal conductivity anisotropy that reduces with pressure. Our modeled thermal conductivity profiles of the brucite and periclase along a slab's geotherm further indicate a significant increase in the thermal conductivity by ~6-fold to 19-fold, depending on brucite's crystal orientation, at a depth of ~800 km. The large thermal conductivity discontinuity across the decomposition of brucite to periclase suggests that a local high-temperature anomaly can be induced as the brucite-rich aggregate within a slab is subducted to the shallow lower mantle and eventually decomposed, enhancing the slab's buoyancy for stagnation and release of water in the region. Similar to the endothermic ringwoodite to bridgmanite and ferropericlase transition at ~660 km depth that increases slab's buoyancy (Goes et al. 2017), the decomposition of brucite at ~800 km depth not only creates additional effective mantle resistance that impacts the slab dynamics but serves as a new water source that promotes the formation of dehydration melts, causing seismic low velocities in the shallow lower mantle.

EXPERIMENTAL METHODS

Starting materials and sample preparation

Natural samples of brucite used in this study were collected from Killa Saifullah District in Balochistan, Pakistan. Their chemical composition was confirmed to be $Mg(OH)_2$ using energy-dispersive X-ray spectroscopy with an Oxford X max-80 detector. We determined the crystal orientation along the [100] and [001] axes with single-crystal X-ray diffraction (Bruker X8 APEX). To perform thermal conductivity measurements under high pressures, we first polished each brucite sample down to a thickness of ~30 μm and coated an ~90 nm thick aluminum (Al) film on the brucite. We then loaded the sample, along with a ruby sphere, into a symmetric piston-cylinder DAC with a culet size of 400 μm and a tungsten gasket. We used silicone oil (CAS No. 63148-62-9 from ACROS ORGANICS) as the pressure medium. The schematic illustration of the brucite sample within a DAC is shown in Figure 1. We measured the pressure within the sample chamber using calibrated ruby fluorescence (Mao et al. 1986), which has a typical uncertainty of less than 5% within the pressure range we studied, from ambient to 30 GPa.

Lattice thermal conductivity measurements

We measured the lattice thermal conductivity of brucite using time-domain thermoreflectance (TDTR). TDTR is an ultrafast optical technique, which uses a mode-locked, 785 nm wavelength, Ti:sapphire laser to pump and probe thermal diffusion through a material. The output of the laser was split into pump and probe beams that were both focused onto the Al film coated on the sample. We used the pump beam to heat up the Al film and then used the probe beam to measure the resulting optical reflectivity change on the Al film due to the temperature variations over time (Fig. 1). We measured the in-phase (V_{in}) and out-of-phase (V_{out}) components of variations in the reflected probe beam intensity using a silicon photodiode and lock-in amplifier. Detailed descriptions of the TDTR technique are available in Cahill (2004) and Hsieh et al. (2009).

To derive the thermal conductivity of the brucite sample, we compared the ratio of V_{in} to V_{out} ($-V_{in}/V_{out}$) as a function of delay time between the pump and probe beams to the numerical calculations of a bi-directional heat-flow model (Ge et al. 2006; Schmidt et al. 2008), see Figure 2 for an example of TDTR data compared with model calculations. Table 1 contains the input parameters for the heat-flow model for Figure 2, including laser spot size, Al-film thickness, and the thermal conductivity and volumetric heat capacity of each layer (i.e., silicone oil, Al film, and brucite). As such, the brucite thermal conductivity is the only significant, free parameter in the model, which is determined by manipulating it until the model calculation matches the experimental data with the minimum mean-square error (Fig. 2). We measured the thickness of Al film at ambient conditions using picosecond acoustics (O'Hara et

FIGURE 2. Example time-domain thermoreflectance spectra of brucite along the [100] axis at (a) ambient conditions and (b) 30.33 GPa and room temperature, along with the heat-flow model calculations. Open symbols show the experimental data for the ratio $(-V_{in}/V_{out})$ as a function of delay time. Brucite thermal conductivities of $11.5 \text{ W m}^{-1} \text{ K}^{-1}$ at ambient pressure and $20.0 \text{ W m}^{-1} \text{ K}^{-1}$ at 30.33 GPa provide best-fits to the data, assuming the input parameters listed in

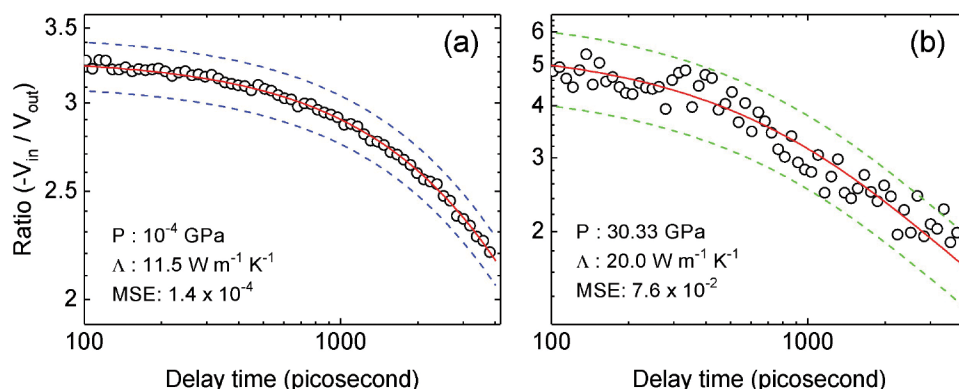


Table 1. Red curves represent the best fit to the data with the minimum value of mean-square error (MSE). The blue and light green dashed curves represent the $\pm 5\%$ and $\pm 20\%$ uncertainty at ambient pressure and 30.33 GPa, respectively. (Color online.)

TABLE 1. Input parameters used in the heat-flow model for brucite along the [100] axis at ambient conditions and at 30.33 GPa and room temperature

Model parameters (unit)	Pressure (GPa)	
	10^{-4}	30.33
r^a (μm)	7.6	7.6
C_{brucite}^b ($\text{J cm}^{-3} \text{ K}^{-1}$)	3.12	3.12
C_{Al}^c ($\text{J cm}^{-3} \text{ K}^{-1}$)	2.42	2.66
C_{Si}^d ($\text{J cm}^{-3} \text{ K}^{-1}$)	N/A	1.4
Λ_{Al}^e ($\text{W m}^{-1} \text{ K}^{-1}$)	200	200
Λ_{Si}^f ($\text{W m}^{-1} \text{ K}^{-1}$)	N/A	1.753
h_{brucite}^g (μm)	30	30
h_{Al}^h (nm)	84.61	91.98
h_{Si}^i (μm)	N/A	10
G^j ($\text{MW m}^{-2} \text{ K}^{-1}$)	43	182

^a Laser spot size (in radius, measured in this study).

^b Volumetric heat capacity of brucite (Saxena et al. 1993), which was assumed to only depend on temperature, not pressure.

^c Volumetric heat capacity of Al (Hsieh et al. 2009).

^d Volumetric heat capacity of silicone oil (Hsieh 2015).

^e Thermal conductivity of Al (Hsieh et al. 2009).

^f Thermal conductivity of silicone oil (Hsieh 2015).

^g Thickness of brucite sample.

^h Thickness of Al film (measured at ambient pressure using picosecond acoustics).

ⁱ Thickness of silicone oil layer between diamond anvil and sample.

^j Thermal conductance at Al-brucite and Al-silicone oil interfaces. Note that for measurements at ambient pressure, the silicone oil was not used and thus its heat capacity, thermal conductivity, and thickness were not taken into account in the heat-flow model.

al. 2001) and estimated the changes in thickness as a function of pressure using the equation-of-state of Al following a method developed in Chen et al. (2011). Since the thermal penetration depths (the skin depth that a heatwave can diffuse into a material) of the silicone oil and brucite sample are both only on the order of a few hundred nanometers (Hsieh et al. 2009), the heat-flow model calculations are not sensitive to their thicknesses. The thermal conductivity and heat capacity of silicone oil and Al as a function of pressure were taken from previous data (Hsieh 2015; Hsieh et al. 2009). The volumetric heat capacity of brucite at ambient conditions is $3.12 \text{ J cm}^{-3} \text{ K}^{-1}$ (Saxena et al. 1993); we assumed it is a constant under high pressure because upon compression the decrease in brucite's specific heat per molecule is largely counterbalanced by the increase in its density (Hermann and Mookherjee 2016; Xia et al. 1998). Figure 2 also shows that the estimated uncertainty of each of the parameters in the heat-flow model (Table 1) propagates an integrated error in the measured brucite thermal conductivity of $\sim 5\%$ at ambient pressure and about 20% at 30 GPa.

EXPERIMENTAL RESULTS

Thermal conductivity at high pressure and room temperature

Figure 3a shows the brucite thermal conductivity (Λ) along the [100] ($\Lambda_{[100]}$) and [001] ($\Lambda_{[001]}$) axes under high pressure

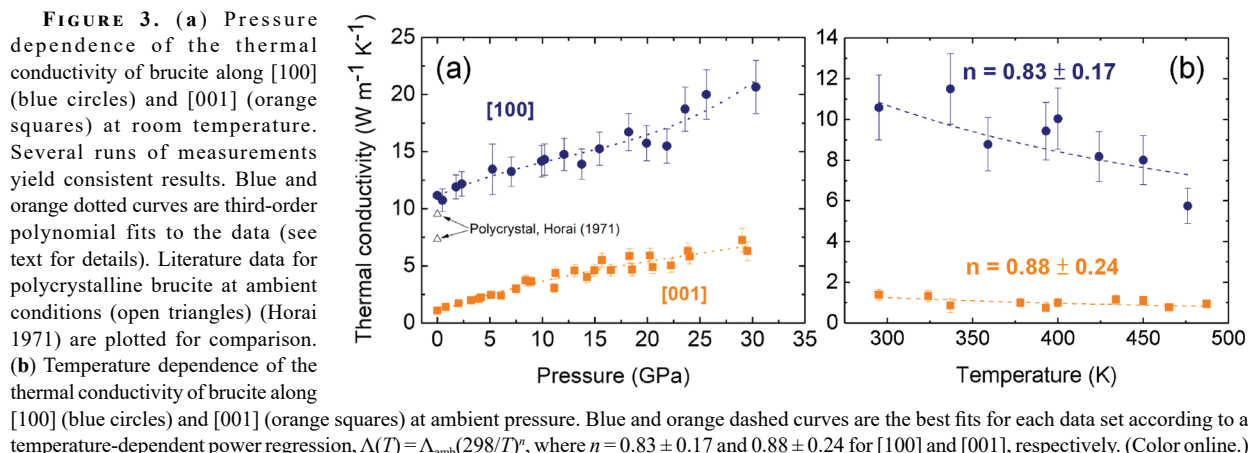
and room temperature. At ambient conditions, the $\Lambda_{[100]}$ and $\Lambda_{[001]}$ are $12.6 \pm 0.11 \text{ W m}^{-1} \text{ K}^{-1}$ and $1.08 \pm 0.08 \text{ W m}^{-1} \text{ K}^{-1}$, respectively, resulting in a large conductivity ratio ($\Lambda_{[100]}/\Lambda_{[001]}$) of 11.7, which indicates a significant conductivity anisotropy between the crystal axes. Literature data for the polycrystalline brucite at ambient conditions from Horai (1971) (open triangles in Fig. 3a) are plotted for comparison, which falls within the range between $\Lambda_{[100]}$ and $\Lambda_{[001]}$. As the pressure increases, the $\Lambda_{[100]}$ and $\Lambda_{[001]}$ increase, reaching $20.7 \pm 2.3 \text{ W m}^{-1} \text{ K}^{-1}$ and $6.3 \pm 0.8 \text{ W m}^{-1} \text{ K}^{-1}$ at 30 GPa, respectively, with a conductivity ratio reducing to about 3.3. The pressure dependence of $\Lambda_{[100]}$ and $\Lambda_{[001]}$ up to 30 GPa form an upper and lower bound, respectively, for the thermal conductivity of brucite. Importantly, during slab subduction, lattice preferred orientation (LPO) could be present in minerals around the interface of slab and mantle, such as in serpentine and talc (Mookherjee and Capitani 2011). If the LPO exists in brucite, whose thermal conductivity is highly anisotropic (Fig. 3a), the heat transfer through the slab could be substantially affected by which axis of brucite that preferentially orients parallel to the direction of slab motion.

Moreover, Hermann and Mookherjee (2016) predicted that brucite undergoes a phase transition from $P\bar{3}$ to $P4_12_1$ at $\sim 22 \text{ GPa}$ and room temperature. Our data show that only the $\Lambda_{[100]}$ presents a small kink coincidentally around 20–23 GPa, which, however, is comparable to the measurement errors. We thus conclude that the potential $P\bar{3}$ to $P4_12_1$ transition, if it exists, does not significantly alter the brucite thermal conductivity.

To estimate the thermal conductivity of brucite under slab's high- P - T conditions (see our discussion below), here we first parameterized the pressure dependences of $\Lambda_{[100]}$ and $\Lambda_{[001]}$ (Fig. 3a) based on the best-fit third-order-polynomial regression (blue and orange dotted curves in Fig. 3a):

$$\Lambda(P) = (\Lambda_{\text{amb}} + aP + bP^2 + cP^3) \quad (1)$$

where Λ_{amb} is the thermal conductivity at ambient conditions, and a , b , and c are the linear, quadratic, and cubic coefficients, respectively. The parameterization coefficients for $\Lambda_{[100]}$ and $\Lambda_{[001]}$ are listed in Table 2.



Thermal conductivity at elevated temperature and ambient pressure

In addition to the high-pressure and room-temperature measurements, to understand the effect of temperature on brucite thermal conductivity, we have also performed TDTR measurements at elevated temperature (up to ~480 K) and ambient pressure, see Figure 3b. Both $\Lambda_{[100]}$ and $\Lambda_{[001]}$ substantially decrease with increasing temperature, for instance, by ~50% at ~480 K. Note that higher temperature results in a degradation of Al film quality and thus a deterioration in measurement integrity. Though our measurement temperature was limited up to ~480 K, temperature dependences of the $\Lambda_{[100]}$ and $\Lambda_{[001]}$ were clearly observed. We fit the data for $\Lambda_{[100]}$ and $\Lambda_{[001]}$ to a power relationship [dashed curves in Fig. 3b (Chang et al. 2017; Hofmeister 1999; Xu et al. 2004; Zhang et al. 2019)], i.e.,

$$\Lambda(T) = \Lambda_{\text{amb}}(298/T)^n \quad (2)$$

where T is the temperature (K) and Λ_{amb} the thermal conductivity at ambient conditions. We find that the exponent, n , equals 0.83 ± 0.17 and 0.88 ± 0.24 for the [100] and [001] orientation, respectively. These values of n are in good agreement with previous results for pure materials, whose thermal conductivity typically follows a T^{-1} dependence (Dalton et al. 2013; Hofmeister 1999; Klemens et al. 1962; Zhang et al. 2019). The slight deviation of our n values from the ideal value ($n = 1$) could be caused by the large amounts of hydroxyl (OH⁻) in brucite, which acts as impurities to enhance phonon scattering, similar to the roles that iron plays in many iron-bearing minerals (Chang et al. 2017; Xu et al. 2004; Zhang et al. 2019).

DISCUSSIONS AND GEOPHYSICAL IMPACTS

Hacker et al. (2003) suggested that brucite could make up a significant portion (10–15 vol%) of depleted lherzolite and harzburgite, which are the abundant rock compositions relevant to a subducting hydrous crust. Mineral physics experiments (Irifune et al. 1998; Ohtani et al. 1995, 2000) have shown that brucite could coexist with phase D at pressures of ~19–27 GPa and temperatures of ~900–1200 K, coinciding with the typical geotherm of a subducting slab at ~600–800 km depth. Our results for the pressure-temperature evolution of brucite thermal conductivity (Fig. 3) offer insights into not only its potential

TABLE 2. Parameterization coefficients for $\Lambda(P) = (\Lambda_{\text{amb}} + aP + bP^2 + cP^3)$ to fit the brucite thermal conductivity data in Figure 3a

Minerals	Λ_{amb}	a	b (10 ⁻²)	c (10 ⁻⁴)	Adj. R ^{2a}
Brucite [100]	11.12 ± 0.51	0.41 ± 0.03	-1.68 ± 0.15	4.37 ± 0.48	0.92
Brucite [001]	1.03 ± 0.12	0.33 ± 0.05	-0.88 ± 0.08	1.01 ± 0.13	0.93
Periclase[100] ^b	53.82 ± 1.79	1.34 ± 0.11	2.46 ± 0.28	-2.86 ± 0.54	0.98

^a Adjusted coefficient of determination (R²) for the third-order polynomial fit.

^b Experimental data for periclase (MgO) up to 60 GPa at room temperature was taken from Dalton et al. (2013).

impacts on the thermal state around a subduction zone but also on the occurrence of slab stagnation in the shallow lower mantle. Although brucite may not be a major mineral phase in the Earth's interior, it could be locally concentrated within a cold and wet subducting slab (Irifune et al. 1998; Ohtani et al. 1995). As such, it could still play a significant role since the effective thermal conductivity of the slab materials largely depends on how the brucite is distributed within the aggregate and on the effect of its decomposition to periclase.

Thermal conductivity discontinuity as brucite decomposes to periclase

To understand the potential temperature anomaly triggered by the decomposition of brucite to periclase, we used the P - T dependences of brucite thermal conductivity (Eqs. 1 and 2) to model the $\Lambda_{[100]}$ and $\Lambda_{[001]}$ of brucite along a representative geotherm of a subducting slab (Eberle et al. 2002), see the blue and orange curves in Figure 4, respectively. Interestingly, both the $\Lambda_{[100]}$ and $\Lambda_{[001]}$ are weakly dependent on the depth, reaching ~6.7 and 2.0 W m⁻¹ K⁻¹, respectively, at ~800 km depth (~30 GPa) where it is expected to decompose to periclase (Hermann and Mookherjee 2016). For the periclase thermal conductivity profile (green curve in Fig. 4), we took the literature data from Dalton et al. (2013) and assumed its thermal conductivity follows a typical T^{-1} dependence (Dalton et al. 2013; Hofmeister 1999; Klemens et al. 1962; Zhang et al. 2019) along the same slab geotherm. At ~800 km depth, the thermal conductivity of periclase increases to ~38 W m⁻¹ K⁻¹, much larger than those of brucite along [100] and [001] by a factor of ~6 and 19, respectively. This implies that as the brucite is locally enriched within a slab and subducted to the depth of ~800 km, the decomposition to periclase could result in a significant discontinuity in the effective thermal conductivity at the peridotite layer of the slab, where brucite is

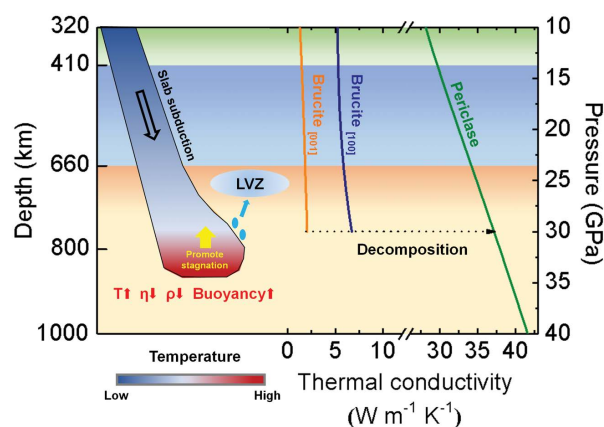


FIGURE 4. Modeled thermal conductivity profiles of brucite (blue and orange curves for [100] and [001], respectively) and periclase (green curve) along a typical cold slab geotherm (Eberle et al. 2002) and a schematic illustration of brucite-rich aggregate in a slab subducted to ~800 km depth. The large thermal conductivity discontinuity (dotted arrow, ~6-fold to 19-fold increase) through the decomposition of brucite to periclase could trigger a local high-temperature (T) anomaly within the slab (red shaded region), which decreases slab's viscosity (η) and density (ρ), while increases its buoyancy. These effects offer a novel mechanism to promote slab stagnation around 800 km depth. Moreover, the water released from brucite decomposition (blue droplets) would migrate upward to the uppermost lower mantle (~700–800 km depth) and facilitate the formation of dehydration melt, resulting in a seismic low-velocity zone (LVZ). (Color online.)

locally enriched. Phase diagram of brucite (Fukui et al. 2005) suggests that at ~1000 K [typical slab geotherm around the top of lower mantle (Eberle et al. 2002; Hermann and Mookherjee 2016)], the brucite would decompose to periclase at pressures of ~25 GPa (~660 km), i.e., slightly shallower depth than the 800 km. Nevertheless, the thermal conductivity discontinuity induced by brucite decomposition along with its geophysical impacts, including a potential high-temperature anomaly, which promotes slab stagnation and release of water in the shallow lower mantle, remains the same (see our discussions below).

It should also be noted that water, either as a liquid or ice VII, may also be a product of this decomposition (Fukui et al. 2005; Hermann and Mookherjee 2016), which could affect the local thermal conductivity. However, the lower viscosity and density of the water will allow it to migrate out of the peridotite layer rapidly enough that its effect should be minimal (Abramson 2007; Bina and Navrotsky 2000).

Potential local high-temperature anomaly promotes slab stagnation in the shallow lower mantle

Global seismic tomography has revealed three main behaviors of subducting slabs in different regions: (1) stagnation at the bottom of the mantle transition zone (~660 km depth); (2) stagnation in the shallow lower mantle (~800–1000 km depth); and (3) further penetration into the lower mantle, potentially reaching the core-mantle boundary (Čížková and Bina 2019; Fukao and Obayashi 2013; Fukao et al. 2009; Lee and King 2011). Several mechanisms or effects have been proposed to account

for such different slab subduction dynamics and causes of slab stagnation. The mechanisms include, for instance, the negative Clapeyron slope at 660 km depth (Ballmer et al. 2015; Mao and Zhong 2018; Torii and Yoshioka 2007), a drastic increase in the ambient mantle viscosity (Alpert et al. 2010; Ballmer et al. 2015; Čížková and Bina 2019; Mao and Zhong 2018; Marquardt and Miyagi 2015), a fraction of basalt in pyrolitic mantle (Ballmer et al. 2015), trench retreat, and slab's age and dipping angle (Christensen 1996; Goes et al. 2017; Mao and Zhong 2018), etc.

Mechanisms that flatten a sinking slab in the shallow lower mantle (~800–1000 km depth), however, remain poorly understood as there is no major phase transition of lower mantle minerals within such depth range. Based on the analysis of the long wavelengths of the geoid, Rudolph et al. (2015) found an increase in mantle viscosity in the depth range of ~800–1200 km that may result in the slab stagnation around this depth range. On the other hand, as we discussed before, the temperature profiles in the mantle and subduction zones are a key parameter to control their density, viscosity, and buoyancy with crucial consequences on the slab dynamics. As such, it is intuitive that the slab thermal conductivity, which controls heat flow into the slab, will be an important factor in understanding the causes of slab stagnation.

If the brucite is locally concentrated in a subducting slab and transported to the shallow lower mantle of ~800 km depth and eventually decomposed, the drastic increase in the brucite-rich aggregate thermal conductivity (~6-fold to 19-fold) triggered by the brucite decomposition to periclase would considerably enhance the heat transfer from the surrounding mantle into the slab, leading to a local high-temperature anomaly at the core of the slab. Though the decomposition reaction may increase the slab density, it is a relatively small amount and localized at the top of the slab. The rise of temperature through the slab, in turn, reduces the slab's density and viscosity and enhances its buoyancy, hindering the descent of the subducting slab to a deeper lower mantle (see the red shaded region within the slab in Fig. 4). Similar to the endothermic ringwoodite to bridgmanite and ferropericlase transition at ~660 km depth that absorbs heat and increases slab's buoyancy (Goes et al. 2017), the scenario by brucite decomposition offers a new mechanism to additionally enhance the effective mantle resistance at ~800 km depth that could, at least partially, contribute to the stagnation of slabs in the shallow lower mantle as observed by tomographic images.

An additional water source to promote low-velocity zones at the top of the lower mantle

In addition to the slab stagnation, seismic tomography has also imaged seismic low-velocity zones (LVZs) at the top of the lower mantle, ~700–800 km depth (see, e.g., Fukao and Obayashi 2013; Schmandt et al. 2014). Mineral physics experiments coupled with electrical conductivity measurements and geodynamics modeling suggest that the LVZs at the top of the lower mantle may be associated with the formation of partial melts assisted by hydrous fluids released either from the hydrous ringwoodite-bridgmanite phase transition as the mantle flows downward across the 660 km discontinuity, or from the decomposition of dense hydrous magnesium silicates (DHMS), e.g., superhydrous phase B and phase D (Karato 2011; Ohtani 2015, 2018; Schmandt et al. 2014).

The hydrous minerals in the peridotite layer of a subducting slab undergo a series of phase transitions during subduction, in which phase D along with brucite could coexist at the *P-T* conditions of a subducting slab at ~600–800 km depth (Irifune et al. 1998; Ohtani 2005, 2015; Ohtani et al. 2018). In addition to the DHMS that can release water via dehydration, brucite, which contains large amounts of water (~30 wt%), could also serve as a water source to facilitate the formation of partial melt, leading to the seismic anomalies in the region: when the brucite-rich aggregate is subducted to ~800 km depth, the decomposition process releases H₂O that can migrate upward (see the schematic illustration in Fig. 4) due to its lower density and viscosity (Abramson 2007), additionally contributing to water accumulation around the top of the lower mantle. Moreover, the local high-temperature anomaly induced by brucite decomposition to periclasite would help destabilize other coexisting hydrous minerals (e.g., phase D) and enhance their dehydration, releasing more water to the ambient mantle. As an additional water source and driver for local higher temperature anomalies, brucite decomposition provides a novel mechanism for the formation of the LVZs at the top of the lower mantle with broader implications for the route and budget of the deep-water cycle.

IMPLICATIONS

The combination of our novel experimental results with data modeling enables us to infer that upon its decomposition, the brucite-rich aggregate within a sinking slab could create a local thermal anomaly, influencing not only the slab's subduction dynamics but also the stability field of minerals and seismic structures in the surrounding mantle. Such effects are expected to be general since the hydrous minerals in a sinking slab undergo a series of phase transitions during subduction. Therefore, future experimental studies on the thermal conductivity of other prominent hydrous minerals, such as a series of DHMS, under relevant *P-T* conditions may uncover additional thermal conductivity discontinuities present across phase transitions. An improved understanding of this thermal conductivity framework has important implications for the local thermal states and the mantle and subducting slab's dynamics. Further combination of our experimental findings and numerical thermochemical modeling will significantly advance our understanding of the thermochemical structures of subduction zones and their effects on the budget and route of Earth's deep water transportation.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS AND FUNDING

We also thank Yoshiyuki Iizuka, Dylan W. Meyer, Yuh-Sheng Wen, Chao-Chih Chen, Yi-Chi Tsao, and Yu-Shiang Wang of Academia Sinica for their help with the experiments and helpful comments. This work was supported by the Academia Sinica and the Ministry of Science and Technology (MOST) of Taiwan, Republic of China, under Contract AS-CDA-106-M02, 106-2116-M-001-022, and 107-2628-M-001-004-MY3. W.P.H. acknowledges the fellowship from the Foundation for the Advancement of Outstanding Scholarship, Taiwan.

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MANUSCRIPT RECEIVED JANUARY 25, 2021

MANUSCRIPT ACCEPTED MAY 19, 2021

MANUSCRIPT HANDLED BY ZHICHENG JING