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Y H. Guo
Fudan university Shanghai China

D. L. Sun
Fudan University China

Zaiping Guo
University of Wollongong, zguo@uow.edu.au

Hua-Kun Liu
University of Wollongong, hua@uow.edu.au

WW Sun
Fudan University

See next page for additional authors

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Dehydrogenation Promotion of LiBH₄·NH₃ Through Heating in Ammonia or Mixing with Metal Hydrides

Y. H. Guo,† W. W. Sun,‡ Z. P. Guo,‡ H. K. Liu,‡ D. L. Sun,‡ and X. B. Yu*†,‡

Department of Materials Science, Fudan University, Shanghai 200433, China, and Institute for Superconducting and Electronic Materials, University of Wollongong, NSW 2522, Australia

Received: April 28, 2010; Revised Manuscript Received: June 4, 2010

Ammonioluminethorbydride (LiBH₄·NH₃) is one of the most hydrogen-rich inorganic materials, showing potential application for hydrogen storage. In this paper, the dehydrogenation of LiBH₄·NH₃ was promoted significantly through heating in ammonia atmosphere which demonstrated that the coordinate between NH₃ and LiBH₄ is a crucial factor in inducing the hydrogen release for this system. Meanwhile, several metal hydrides LiH, NaH, and CaH₂ were found to be effective in promoting the dehydrogenation of LiBH₄·NH₃. Among the studied additives, the effect of LiH, as an example, was discussed in detail. It was found that the promotion of dehydrogenation through LiH is due to the reaction: 3LiH + 3LiBH₄·NH₃ → Li₄BN₃H₁₀ + 2LiBH₄ + 3H₂, releasing hydrogen from 60 °C.

Introduction

Solid-state hydrogen storage systems hold great promise for onboard applications. The key criteria for a successful system are high storage capacity, suitable thermodynamics, and fast hydriding and dehydriding kinetics.1-2 After decades of intensive work, a series of candidates, including metal hydrides,3-4 chemical hydrides,5-8 organometallic complexes,9 etc., have been investigated and developed. However, no single system has yet been identified that satisfies all the criteria for hydrogen storage in automobile applications.

Recently, ammonia complexes of metal borohydrides, M(BH₄)ₓ·nNH₃, where M is a metal, showed potential as solid hydrogen storage materials.9-12 In these compounds, the hydrogen on the nitrogen and boron in their molecules shows protic and hydridic characteristics, respectively, which may allow a facile H₂ elimination pathway, as demonstrated by many previous reports.12-14 For instance, Mg(BH₄)ₓ·2NH₃ has a hydrogen capacity of 16.0 wt % and starts to release hydrogen below 150 °C,12 which is considered to be competitive with the promising ammonia borane.15-16

Among these ammonia complexes, ammonioluminethorbydride (LiBH₄·NH₃) holds the highest hydrogen capacity of 18.0 wt % and it is also one of the most hydrogen-rich inorganic materials. This material was first reported 50 years ago.13 Recently, its crystal structure and decomposition properties have been studied in detail.14-24 For instance, Mg(BH₄)ₓ·2NH₃ has a hydrogen capacity of 16.0 wt % and starts to release hydrogen below 150 °C,12 which is considered to be competitive with the promising ammonia borane.15-16

Ammonium complex and LiBH₄ (granule, 95%, Sigma-Aldrich, USA), LiH (98%, −30 mesh powder, Sigma-Aldrich, USA), and NH₃ (Alfa Aesar, USA). LiBH₄ and LiH were used as received. NH₃ was purified by soda lime when used. All handling except for ammonia related procedures was conducted under anaerobic and anhydrous conditions by Schlenk techniques and in a glovebox filled with argon.

LiBH₄·NH₃ was prepared by exposing LiBH₄ to NH₃ atmosphere at room temperature. Figure S1 (Supporting Information) shows a schematic diagram of the reaction system. A 1.0 g portion of LiBH₄ was loaded into a Schlenk tube and evacuated by a rotary vacuum pump. Subsequently, purified NH₃ at 1 bar pressure was introduced into the tube and kept there for 20 min. The tube was then evacuated for 3 h to yield LiBH₄·NH₃.

The mole ratio of NH₃ to LiBH₄ in the product was examined by the following formula: x = (weight gain/initial weight of LiBH₄) × 21.8/17.03. By weighing the products, the mole ratio of NH₃ to LiBH₄ for the prepared sample was determined to be 1.01. The XRD pattern also confirms the formation of LiBH₄·NH₃ (Figure S2, Supporting Information).

LiH/LiBH₄·NH₃, NaH/LiBH₄·NH₃, CaH₂/LiBH₄·NH₃, and MgH₂/LiBH₄·NH₃ were prepared by mixing LiBH₄·NH₃ with the metal hydride, then the mixture was hand milled for 10 min to get the composites.

Thermal property measurements were performed by thermogravimetry (TGA, STA 409C)/mass spectroscopy (MS, QMS).
403) with a heating rate of 10 °C/min under 1 atm of argon. The sample cell was exposed to vacuum and then filled with argon three times before the measurement to avoid oxidation during heating. Desorption properties for some samples were also evaluated using Sievert’s volumetric methods with various heating rates under argon at a pressure of 1 bar or ammonia atmosphere with various pressures.

Powder X-ray diffraction (XRD, Rigaku D/max 2400) measurements were conducted to confirm the phase structure. Amorphous polymer tape was used to cover the surface of the powder to avoid oxidation during the XRD measurement. FTIR (Magna-IR 550 II, Nicolet) analyses were conducted to determine the chemical bonds. Samples were pressed with KBr and then loaded into a sealed chamber filled with argon to be measured.

Results and Discussion

1. Dehydrogenation Promotion in Ammonia Atmosphere.

As revealed in our previous study, fast heating rate and the presence of ammonia atmosphere are benefit to increase the hydrogen release content of LiBH4·NH3 due to the inhibition of ammonia release at low temperature.26 Herein, the decomposition properties of LiBH4 under ammonia were investigated in detail in order to get an in-depth understanding of the dehydrogenation mechanism of LiBH4·NH3. Figure 1 shows the TPD result of LiBH4 in 1.5 atm of ammonia, in which three apparent stages can be observed. In the first stage, LiBH4 quickly absorbed ammonia to form coordination compounds of LiBH4·xNH3.26 After heating to about 100 °C, the coordination compounds started to release ammonia and the LiBH4·xNH3 can be stable until 190 °C, which is much higher than the onset decomposition temperature (∼60 °C) of LiBH4·NH3 in argon,26 indicating that the presence of ammonia is very effective in stabilizing the ammonia in this compound. In the second stage, gas release proceeded from 120 to 350 °C with an increase gas amount of 0.5 equiv, strongly suggesting that hydrogen release has occurred in this stage. In addition, after the second stage, a weight increase of 10 wt.% was present, which may result from the reaction of LiBH4 with NH3 introducing some N into the product. Combined with the results of weight change and gas evolution, the mole ratio of the reacted NH3 to LiBH4 is calculated to be 0.23, indicating that the majority of [BH4]− may still remain. From the XRD patterns for the product heated to 340 °C in ammonia (Figure 2), peaks assigned to LiBH4 together with other unidentified ones were observed. These unidentified peaks should ascribe to the products of the dehydrogenation reaction. The appearance of LiBH4 is accordan with the TPD results discussed above. Consequently, the gas evolution in the third stage, starting from above 410 °C should mainly correspond to the dehydrogenation of the regenerated LiBH4.

As for the above procedure, a seemingly contradictory phenomenon was presented, in which the hydrogen release induced through the combination of [BH4]− and NH3 ceased abruptly when temperature rose above 343 °C although a substantial amount of LiBH4 remained. However, it is not difficult to discover that the temperature contributes a negative effect on the coordination between LiBH4 and NH3, namely, higher temperature destroys the Li−N coordinate bond. At lower temperature, NH3 can bond to LiBH4 to form LiBH4·xNH3, but at a higher temperature (e.g., >343 °C), LiBH4·xNH3 will decompose into LiBH4 and gaseous NH3. Thus, it is concluded that the formation of a Li−N coordinate bond between LiBH4 and NH3 was crucial in inducing the dehydrogenation. To confirm the above assumption, the decomposition properties for an alternative borohydride, NaBH4, was investigated at the same conditions. TPD results (Figure 1) revealed that the NaBH4 can also absorb ammonia at low temperature, but the formed coordinate compound was very unstable and decomposed completely at 52 °C, implying its quite weak binding strength compared to LiBH4·NH3. Further heating NaBH4, distinguished from that of LiBH4, no apparent gas evolution was observed until the sample was heated above the decomposition temperature of NaBH4. This result clearly demonstrates that formation of a coordinate between NH3 and borohydrides is benefit to the combination of [BH4]− and NH3 to release hydrogen.

Furthermore, it is known that an equilibrium exists between the ammonia complex of LiBH4 and the ammonia pressure, i.e., a higher pressure resulting in a larger ammonia content in the ammonia complex of LiBH4 at a certain temperature.15 It suggests that an elevated ammonia pressure may be effective in improving the dehydrogenation properties of the ammonia complex. Figure 3a shows the TPD curves for LiBH4 in ammonia with various pressures. All these processes undergo similar stages: ammonia absorption, ammonia desorption, and hydrogen releasing. But the final gas release content increased with increasing ammonia pressure. On the basis of the gravimetric and volumetric results, the N content in the final product and the hydrogen release amount can be calculated26 as shown in Figure 3b. It revealed that both the N content in the final product and the hydrogen release content increased with the increase of the ammonia pressure. This further confirms that the formation of a coordinate bond between NH3 and LiBH4 is crucial for the hydrogen release from this system. Generally, an ammonia atmosphere is a benefit for the stabilization of the coordinate compound of LiBH4·NH3 and an elevated ammonia pressure may enable more NH3 bonding to LiBH4 at the temperature above the dehydrogenation temperature, resulting in promotion of hydrogen release during heating.
2. Dehydrogenation Promotion through Metal Hydrides.

Although full dehydrogenation of LiBH₄·NH₃ may be achieved in ammonia with an elevated pressure, the temperature is still high to above 300 °C. Furthermore, the presence of ammonia is unlikely to be used with a fuel cell as ammonia is a potent fuel cell catalyst poison. Therefore, seeking new approaches to stabilize the NH group is necessary. Here, our results show that a few metal hydrides are effective additives to realize hydrogen liberation from LiBH₄·NH₃.

Figure 4 shows the TG/MS results for the LiH/LiBH₄·NH₃ system, which exhibits a three-step decomposition. In the first stage (60–150 °C), emissions of both ammonia and hydrogen were detected, but the emission of ammonia can be suppressed significantly by increasing the LiH content in the mixtures, and total suppression of ammonia emission was achieved when the mole ratio of LiH to LiBH₄·NH₃ increased to 3:1. In the second (260–350 °C) and third (400–480 °C) stages, no ammonia was detected in the gaseous product. This clearly demonstrates that LiH can improve the hydrogen release from LiBH₄·NH₃, as well as suppressing the ammonia release.

To clarify the hydrogen release mechanism for this system, further investigations were conducted on the samples at different stages. For the three mixtures heated to 150 °C, X-ray diffraction (XRD) results (Figure 5) apparently indicate the formation of Li₄BN₃H₁₀ and LiBH₄, while the peaks assigned to LiBH₄·NH₃ disappeared. Furthermore, peaks for LiH are unidentified in the 1:1 ratio sample but can be observed in the samples with mole ratios of 2:1 and 3:1. These results suggest that LiH can react with LiBH₄·NH₃ to form Li₄BN₃H₁₀ and LiBH₄ below 150 °C, and the stoichiometric LiH to LiBH₄·NH₃ mole ratio for the reaction should be less than 2:1. In the Fourier transform infrared (FTIR) spectra of these products (Figure S3 in Supporting Information), the B–H stretching modes were observed at 2220, 2290, and 2390 cm⁻¹, and the BH₂ deformation band was observed at 1120 cm⁻¹, indicating that the [BH₄]⁻ group did not change much during the reaction. This also suggests that the reaction may be occurring between the LiH and the NH group in the LiBH₄·NH₃.

Figure 5. XRD patterns for the products of LiH/LiBH₄·NH₃ (mole ratios: 1:1, 2:1, 3:1) heated to 150 °C.

It has been reported that Li₄BN₃H₁₀ can be formed through the reaction of two potential hydrogen storage materials, LiBH₄ and LiNH₂. So it is predicted that LiNH₂ forms an intermediate via reactions 1 and 2 below, and then LiNH₂ will further react with LiBH₄ to produce Li₄BN₃H₁₀ via reaction 3. It has been reported that the reaction between LiH and NH₃ is ultrafast, and our attempt to synthesize LiNH₂ by exposing LiH in 1 bar of ammonia atmosphere at 60 °C also indicates the feasibility of the reaction of LiH with ammonia to produce LiNH₂ (Figure 6). Thus reaction between LiH and LiBH₄·NH₃...
is probably a three-step reaction as predicted above. And the overall reaction in the first step can be speculated as eq 4.

\[
\text{LiBH}_4 \cdot \text{NH}_3 \rightarrow \text{LiBH}_4 + \text{NH}_3 \quad \text{(above 60°C)} \tag{1}
\]

\[
\text{LiH} + \text{NH}_3 \rightarrow \text{LiNH}_4 + \text{H}_2 \quad \text{(above 60°C)} \tag{2}
\]

\[
3\text{LiNH}_4 + \text{LiBH}_4 \rightarrow \text{Li}_2\text{BN}_3\text{H}_{10} \quad \text{(above 60°C)} \tag{3}
\]

\[
3\text{LiH} + 3\text{LiBH}_4 \cdot \text{NH}_3 \rightarrow \text{Li}_2\text{BN}_3\text{H}_{10} + 2\text{LiBH}_4 + \text{NH}_3 \quad \text{(60–150°C)} \tag{4}
\]

On the basis of eq 4, it is estimated that the theoretical hydrogen release capacity of the first step from the stoichiometric mixture, i.e., the 1:1 ratio, is 4.3 wt %. However, this mixture lost 15.1 wt % of its original weight according to the TG results (Figure 4), much of which was definitely the result of ammonia release. Increasing the LiH amount was shown to be an effective way to suppress ammonia emission. For the LiH/LiBH\(_4\)·NH\(_3\) mixture with a mole ratio of 3:1, a weight loss of 3.6 wt %, which is quite close to the theoretical hydrogen capacity (3.2 wt %) for the first step, was observed, indicating the good suppression of ammonia release. The fact that excessive LiH addition is required to depress the ammonia evolution from LiBH\(_4\)·NH\(_3\) is related to the reaction kinetics between LiH and NH\(_3\). As shown previously,\(^{23}\) increasing the surface area of LiH particles can effectively suppress escape of NH\(_3\) from the LiNH\(_4\) + LiH system because more surfaces are available for the reaction between LiH and NH\(_3\) (above 60 °C).

Furthermore, the apparent activation energy \(E_a\) for the first hydrogen release step was determined using Kissinger’s method.\(^{33}\) In the present study, LiH/LiBH\(_4\)·NH\(_3\) with a mole ratio of 3:1 was used to obtain mainly hydrogen release from the mixture. \(T_m\) was extracted from the temperature-programmed desorption (TPD) curves of the LiH/LiBH\(_4\)·NH\(_3\) system at various heating rates, as shown in Figure 7. Results show that the gas desorption curves were shifted to higher temperatures, as expected, with increasing heating rates from 0.5 to 3 °C/min. \(T_m\) values were obtained by differentiating the hydrogen desorption curves. They are 74, 82, 90, and 97 °C, corresponding to the heating rates of 0.5, 1, 2, and 3 °C/min, respectively. From the slope of the fitted \(\ln(\beta/T_m^2)\) versus \(1/T_m\) line, the apparent activation energy \(E_a\) was determined to be approximately 78.5 kJ/mol as shown in Figure 7.

In the temperature range of 260–350 °C, more than 5 wt % hydrogen was further released from these mixtures. The hydrogen evolution temperature range was similar to that of LiBNH\(_{10}\).\(^{27-29}\) XRD results for the mixture heated to 350 °C (Figure 8) indicate the disappearance of LiBNH\(_{10}\) and appearance of new phases assigned to Li\(_3\)N—BN and LiBN\(_2\), which have been reported to be the decomposition products of LiBNH\(_{10}\).\(^{22,27-29}\) In addition, peaks for LiBH\(_4\) and LiH were still apparent in the products of the LiH/LiBH\(_4\)·NH\(_3\) mixture when its mole ratio exceeded 2:1. Meanwhile, the FTIR results (Figure S4 in Supporting Information) for these products show subdued characteristic frequencies of the [BH\(_4\)]\(^-\) group between 2200 and 2400 cm\(^{-1}\), indicating the consumption of the [BH\(_4\)]\(^-\) group in the second hydrogen release stage. On the basis of the above results, it can be concluded that the subsequent hydrogen release is likely due to the decomposition of LiBNH\(_{10}\), while LiBH\(_4\) and residual LiH do not have obvious effects toward improving its decomposition. For the last hydrogen release step above 400 °C, as LiBH\(_4\) was observed in the products heated to 350 °C (Figure 8) and the onset temperature is similar to that of pure LiBH\(_4\), it is clearly ascribed to the decomposition of LiBH\(_4\). A differential scanning calorimetry (DSC) curve (Figure S5 in Supporting Information) of LiH/LiBH\(_4\)·NH\(_3\) (mole ratio 3:1) shows clear endothermic peaks centered at 58 and 113.7 °C that correspond to the melting of LiBH\(_4\)·NH\(_3\) and the phase transformation of LiBH\(_4\), respectively. However, no apparent peak was observed over the temperature range of 60–150 °C, suggesting insignificant thermal effects for reaction 4. But attempts to recharge the decomposition products of LiH/LiBH\(_4\)·NH\(_3\) (mole ratio: 3:1) at 130 °C and 8.5 MPa of H\(_2\) for 8 h were unsuccessful.

From the decomposition behavior of the LiH/LiBH\(_4\)·NH\(_3\) system, we can deduce that the negatively charged hydrogen in LiH is more reactive than the hydrogen in [BH\(_4\)]\(^-\) in combining with the negatively charged hydrogen in NH\(_3\). After the reaction between LiH and the NH\(_3\) released from LiBH\(_4\)·NH\(_3\) that eventually results in the formation of LiBNH\(_{10}\), the H\(^+\) carrier [NH\(_3\)]\(^-\) group was able to stay stable together with [BH\(_4\)]\(^-\) in one molecule to higher temperature, enabling the combination of NH···HB to produce hydrogen without ammonia emission. Moreover, the onset temperature of 260 °C for hydrogen release from LiBNH\(_{10}\) suggests the difficulty of the combination of NH···HB in LiBNH\(_{10}\) and also gives indirect proof of the difficulty for the combination of the NH···HB dihydrogen bond in LiBH\(_4\)·NH\(_3\).

Guided by the above combination mechanism, it is proposed that other metal hydrides, in which the hydrogen is also negatively charged, may have a similar effect as LiH did. Therefore, more metal hydrides, including NaH, CaH\(_2\), and MgH\(_2\) were further investigated. Figure 9 shows their TPD results together with LiH/LiBH\(_4\)·NH\(_3\) and LiBH\(_4\)·NH\(_3\). Compared with LiH/LiBH\(_4\)·NH\(_3\), similar three-step decompositions were observed for NaH/LiBH\(_4\)·NH\(_3\) and CaH\(_2\)/LiBH\(_4\)·NH\(_3\).
Dehydrogenation of LiBH₄·NH₃ in Ammonia

**Figure 9.** TPD results for LiH/LiBH₄·NH₃ (mole ratio 2:1), NaH/LiBH₄·NH₃ (mole ratio 2:1), CaH₂/LiBH₄·NH₃ (mole ratio 1:1), MgH₂/LiBH₄·NH₃ (mole ratio 1:1), and LiBH₂·NH₃ at a heating rate of 5 °C/min.

Similarly, in the first stage, NaH and CaH₂ were proposed to react with LiBH₄·NH₃, resulting in hydrogen release at about 40 and 150 °C, respectively. Then the formed intermediate products decomposed in the temperature range from 200 to 400 °C. Finally, the regenerated LiBH₄ decomposed at above 440 °C. The above results clearly suggest that NaH and CaH₂ can also promote the dehydrogenation of LiBH₄·NH₃ as LiH did, while the onset hydrogen release temperature, i.e., the reaction temperature of LiBH₄·NH₃ with the metal hydrides, increases in the order of NaH < LiH < CaH₂. However, unlike the above hydrides, no obvious effect was found for MgH₂/LiBH₄·NH₃, which may be due to the slow reaction of MgH₂ with NH₃ as indicated by previous report. It is believed that electronegativity of hydrogen atom for the metal hydride plays an important role in promoting the dehydrogenation of LiBH₄·NH₃. As NaH in which the hydrogen atom is more electronegative than that of LiH reacted easier with LiBH₄·NH₃, it is likely that the more electronegative the hydrogen is in the metal hydrides, the easier for it to combine with the positively charged hydrogen in NH₃. Further studies on the factors influencing the combination of metal hydrides with LiBH₄·NH₃ are still in progress.

**Conclusions.** In summary, two important properties of amminelithium borohydride (LiBH₄·NH₃), the mechanism of dehydrogenation of LiBH₄·NH₃ and dehydrogenation promotion of LiBH₄·NH₃ through metal hydrides, were reported in this paper. The formation of a coordinate bond between NH₃ and LiBH₄ was found to be a crucial factor in inducing hydrogen release from LiBH₄·NH₃, and an elevated ammonia pressure was able to improve the dehydrogenation due to an increased ammonia content bonding to LiBH₄ above its dehydrogenation temperature. Meanwhile, several metal hydrides including LiH, NaH, and CaH₂ were found effective in suppressing the ammonia evolution from LiBH₄·NH₃. In the case of a LiH/LiBH₄·NH₃ system, they can react via 3LiH + 3LiBH₄·NH₃ → Li₃BNH₆ + 2LiBH₄ + 3H₂, releasing hydrogen from 60 °C. Our results will provide help in deep understanding of the decomposition of ammonia complexes of borohydrides as well as an alternative method to promote the dehydrogenation and suppress the ammonia evolution from B–N related hydrogen storage candidates.

**Acknowledgment.** The authors acknowledge Dr. Tania Silver for her help in editing the manuscript. This work was partially supported by the 973 program (A001070904), the Shanghai Leading Academic Discipline Project (B113), the Shanghai Pujiang Project (08PJ14014), and an Australian Research Council (ARC) Discovery project (DP0878661).

**Supporting Information Available:** Schematic diagram of the reaction system, XRD pattern for the as-prepared LiBH₄·NH₃ at room temperature, FTIR spectra for the products of LiH/LiBH₄·NH₃ heated to 150 and 350 °C, and DSC curve for LiH/LiBH₄·NH₃ at a heating rate of 2 °C/min. This material is available free of charge via the Internet at http://pubs.acs.org.

**References and Notes**