

Paññā

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Paññā is translated into English as understanding, knowledge, wisdom or insight. But knowledge is different from understanding. Understanding is wisdom and insight, because they come from one's experience. But as far as knowledge is concerned, it is based not on one's own experience. *Paññā* is born out of experience.

Prajñā (Pāli: *paññā*) is made up of prefix 'pra' which means *pratyakṣa* (direct) and 'jñā' (to experience). So *prajñā* means direct knowledge i.e., knowledge at the experiential level. One can know that *rasamalai* (a variety of Indian sweet) is sweet by eating and tasting it and not by hearing somebody say that it is sweet. And how can one differentiate between one kind of sweetness and another kind of sweetness without tasting them? Understanding is like tasting, neither imagining nor intellectualizing.

The *paññā* that the Buddha talks about is born out of one's own experience. The purer the experience, the clearer and sharper is the *paññā* and the experience of a person can be pure when he is free from defilements. According to the Buddha defilements can be removed by observing *sīla* (moral precepts). That is why it has been said that wisdom is purified by morality. The following quotation from the Soṇadaṇḍa Sutta brings out the characteristics of *paññā*.

'Sīlaparidhotā paññā, paññāparidhotam sīlam. Yattha sīlam tattha paññā, yattha paññā tatthga sīlam. Sīlavato paññā, paññāvato sīlam'

'For wisdom is purified by morality, and morality is purified by wisdom; where one is, the other is, the moral man has wisdom and the wise man has morality, and the combination of morality and wisdom is called the highest thing in the world.'

In the Mūlapariyāya Sutta, the Buddha has shown that only a virtuous man can have understanding, wisdom or insight and a wise man *is* virtuous. Of the three kinds of people viz. *puthujjana* (a worldling), *sekkha* (a learner) and an *Arahant*, a Buddha or a *Tathāgata*, the last has developed complete understanding because he is virtuous.

This *paññā*, therefore, is the best instrument to know the real characteristics of worldly objects. By sharpening the weapon of *paññā*, one can cut down the roots of desires—the cause of suffering and attain a blissful state. *Paññā* enables one to go beyond the conventional truth (*sammuti sacca*) and attain the ultimate truth (*paramattha sacca*) where one experiences the three characteristics (impermanence, suffering and not-self) of all objects of the world that people hanker after. When one attains this knowledge, one becomes disillusioned and develops non-attachment (*nirveda*).

Three kinds of *paññā* have been described by the Buddha. The first is *sutamayā paññā* i.e., knowledge gained by listening to others. The second is *cintāmayā paññā*, which one attains not by listening to others but by his own reasoning and reflection. And the third is *bhāvanāmayā paññā*, which one attains by his own experience.

According to the Buddha, the third kind of *paññā* is the most important of all as it enables one to realize the real nature of things. So as long as one does not know the real nature of things, he lives in darkness. One is attracted towards different objects of the world and creates desires (*taṇhā*), which are the causes of his suffering. *Bhāvanāmayā paññā* helps one know the real nature of objects clearly. As a result, he grows wise, knows the transitory nature of the objects of the world, is not attached to them and does not create and multiply his desires. Thus, *bhāvanāmayā paññā* liberates one from suffering and also helps him come out of the cycle of birth and death.

It is by virtue of the cultivation of this *paññā* that one really comes to know why and where *taṇhā* (desire) arises and how and where it can be ended. Thus, it is this *paññā*, which explains how desire is created and how it can be eliminated.

What is necessary for developing this *paññā*?

For developing this *paññā*, the purity of mind is a *sine qua non* and this purity of mind cannot be attained without observing precepts. Only when five precepts like abstaining from killing, stealing, committing adultery, telling lies and taking intoxicants are observed, defilements like aversion, greed, sensuality, pride etc. can be rooted out. Under the influence of these defilements, a person violates precepts.

Abstaining from intoxicants is the most important condition for mind to attain concentration and work properly. How can it work properly under the influence of intoxicating things? Concentration of mind cannot also be achieved if it is under the influence of pollutants like greed, aversion, jealousy etc. They are powerful distracting agents. Observation of precepts enables one to get rid of them.

Once the concentration of mind is attained it is easy to experience impermanence. When one sees different objects of the world, they produce sensations which are pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. They do not last forever. They keep on changing. One experiences their impermanent nature. As Benjamin Franklin once said, “Experience keeps a dear school, but fools will learn in no other.” Even fools can learn in the school of experience. So, what does experience do? It enables one to see things changing, particularly sensations, which arise and pass away the same way over and over again. Sensation, which is an important object of meditation when one practices vipassana, arises on one’s body and passes away. Whatever its nature, pleasant, unpleasant or neutral, it keeps on changing; it does not last forever. One experiences this again and again. Thus, one’s *bhāvanāmayā paññā* develops and he realizes with its help that nothing in this world is permanent. Thus, the veil of the darkness and ignorance is rent and he develops non-attachment to things of the world to which he used to be attached when he did not know their true nature.

The beauty of this *paññā* is that like the first two it cannot be developed by a man who has defilements like craving and aversion. Freedom from defilements is the *sine qua non* for developing this *paññā*. Because physical and vocal actions follow one’s volition, wholesome or unwholesome, so only freedom from defilements will keep both these actions pure.

With this *paññā* developed one can prove the veracity of the Law of Dependent Origination and the Law of Impermanence—profound laws discovered and taught by the Buddha. With the help of the Law of Dependent Origination, he proved how suffering is caused and how it can be ended. With the help of the Law of Impermanence, he showed why one should give up attachment for worldly objects—attachment which causes desire—the root cause of suffering.

But persons who are not pure—in other words, who do not observe *sīla* and whose physical and vocal actions are not pure—are not spiritually fit to

develop this *paññā*, let alone understand its characteristics. The laboratory where the experiment of whether the Law of Impermanence and the Law of Dependent Origination are true or not, can be done only in this fathom-long body by a person who has a pure mind and whose conduct is good.

Thus, it becomes clear that whereas the first two *paññās* can be understood by anybody whether his mind is pure or not, *bhāvanāmayā paññā* can be developed and understood by persons who have cultivated mental purity. It can only be understood by those who have cultivated mindfulness and those who with its help understand the impermanent nature of reality i.e., those who have developed *sampajañña* (full awareness). These two qualities cannot be expected in a person who does not observe moral precepts (*sīla*). The concept of *bhāvanāmayā paññā* and how to develop it, therefore, is an invaluable contribution made by the Buddha to world culture.

Once a deity asked the Buddha a question. The question was:

*‘Anto jaṭā bahi jaṭā, jaṭāya jaṭitā pajā/
Taṃ taṃ gotama pucchāmi, ko imaṃ vijaṭaye jaṭanti’*

‘The inner tangle and the outer tangle -
This generation is entangled in a tangle,
And so, I ask of Gotam this question:
Who succeeds in disentangling this tangle?’

The Buddha’s answer was:

*‘Sīle patitṭhāya naro sapañño, cittaṃ paññaṃ ca bhāvayaṃ/
Ātāpī nipako bhikkhu so imaṃ vijaṭaye jaṭan’ti’*

‘When a wise man, established well in Virtue,
Develops Consciousness and Understanding,
Then as a bhikkhu, ardent and sagacious,
He succeeds in disentangling this tangle.’

How this *paññā* can help one to disentangle the tangle becomes clear from what Buddhaghosa says as to who can disentangle the tangle:

‘Just as a man, standing on the ground and taking up a well-sharpened knife might disentangle a great tangle of bamboos, so too he.... standing on the ground of virtue and taking up with the hand of protective-understanding exerted by the power of energy of the knife of insight-understanding, well sharpened on the stone of concentration, might disentangle, cut away and demolish all the tangle of craving....’

Buddhaghosa wrote the *Visuddhimaggo* (The Path of Purification) and explained *sīla* (virtue), *samādhi* (concentration) and *paññā* (wisdom or understanding) in detail.

According to him ‘it is knowing (*jānana*) in a particular mode that separates from the modes of perceiving (*sañjānana*) and cognizing (*vijānana*). For, though the state of knowing (*jānana-bhāva*) is equally present in perception (*saññā*), in consciousness (*viññāṇa*) and in understanding (*paññā*), nevertheless, perception is only the mere perceiving of an object as say ‘blue’ or ‘yellow; it cannot bring about the penetration of its characteristics as impermanent, suffering and not-self. Consciousness only knows the object as blue or yellow but not as impermanent (*anicca*), suffering (*dukkha*) and not-self (*anattā*).

Prajñā helps one to understand the impermanent nature of things. It also enables one to understand that tangles are *taṇhās* (desires) which cause our suffering. It also shows the path to end it. Suffering can be made extinct by annihilating desires. But how to annihilate desires?

If one could know how *jaṭās* are formed and how he is entangled both inside and outside by them and how he can disentangle them, he will have developed *paññā* (intuition, wisdom or understanding).

Right view of the Noble Eightfold Path comes under *prajñā* (understanding).

Right view is understanding suffering, its cause, its cessation and the way leading to its cessation. ‘Birth is suffering; ageing is suffering, death is suffering; sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair are suffering; not to get

what one wants is suffering. In short, the five aggregates affected by clinging are suffering.

The origin of suffering is craving, its cessation is giving up of craving and the way leading to the giving up of craving is to walk on the Noble Eightfold Path and develop *bhāvanāmayā pañña* so that one can realize the impermanent nature of things and develop non-attachment.

The Path to Develop *Bhāvanāmayā Pañña*

The Buddha has explained in many of the *suttas* the training that one has to undergo in order to develop this *pañña*. This training is gradual and there are several steps leading to its culmination. With the help of a beautiful simile, he has shown how this training is given to produce the right type of effect. In the Gaṇakamaggallāna Sutta he says that “when a clever horse trainer obtains a fine thoroughbred colt, he first makes him get used to wearing the bit, and afterwards trains him further.” In the same way the *Tathāgata* first disciplines a person to be tamed by asking him to be virtuous, ‘restrained with the restraint of the Pātimokkha’ and asks him to be ‘perfect in conduct and resort and seeing fear in the slightest fault, train by undertaking the training precepts.’

After he gets into the habit of observing precepts, he is further asked to guard the doors of his sense faculties. Why? Because unless the doors are guarded well, he will, because of the ingrained habit of mind, see a beautiful form or hear a melodious sound or smell a sweet perfume and so on and will go on desiring them. Thus, he will create more miseries for himself. When the sense faculties are unguarded, unwholesome states of covetousness and grief are likely to invade him. So, the Buddha expressly asks him not to grasp at the sign of an object nor at its features (*Nānunimittagāhī hohi, nānu vyañjanagāhī hohi*). *Nimitta* means the object such as eye and *vyañjana* means detailed description of its features like the black eye, the eye like that of a doe or lotus and so on. The same thing applies to all the objects of other sense faculties if they are left unguarded. Therefore, restraint of all sense faculties should be practiced.

After observing precepts and practicing restraint of the sense faculties, the Buddha teaches him to become moderate in eating. Why? Because if one is not moderate in eating one will fall prey to sloth and laziness. Food should be taken neither for amusement nor for intoxication and nor for the sake of physical beauty and attractiveness. It should be taken only for the continuance

of body so that a holy life can be lived. It should also be taken for developing endurance so that he can terminate old feelings without arousing new feelings and be healthy and blameless.

The next quality, which the Buddha asks him to develop is wakefulness. Only when one is awake one will be able to purify one's mind of obstructive states. The next step of the training is to develop mindfulness (*sati*) and full awareness (*sampajañña*) which should be cultivated in all situations of life.

After he develops mindfulness and full awareness he is disciplined further. He is asked to 'resort to a secluded resting place: the forest, the root of a tree, a mountain, a ravine, a hillside cave, a charnel ground, a jungle thicket, an open space or a heap of straw.' After returning from his alms round and having his meal, he sits down cross-legged, keeping his body erect and establishing mindfulness before him. He then purifies his mind of the five hindrances (*nīvaraṇas*) such as *kāmacchanda* (covetousness, sensuality), *byāpāda* (ill-will), *thīnamiddha* (sloth and torpor), *uddhaccakukkucca* (restlessness and remorse) and *vicikicchā* (doubt). After he has got rid of the five hindrances, he is fit to practice *jhāna*. He enters upon and abides in the first *rūpāvacara jhāna*, which is accompanied by applied and sustained thought, with rapture and pleasure born of seclusion. With the stilling of applied and sustained thought, he enters upon and abides in the second *jhāna*, which has self-confidence and singleness of mind without applied and sustained thought, with rapture and pleasure born of concentration. With the fading away of rapture, he abides in equanimity. He is then mindful and fully aware. While still feeling pleasure with the body, he enters upon and abides in the third *jhāna*, on account of which noble ones announce, 'One has a pleasant abiding if he has equanimity and is mindful.' With the abandoning of pleasure and pain, and with the previous disappearance of joy and grief, he enters upon and abides in the fourth *jhāna*, which has neither pain nor pleasure and purity of mindfulness due to equanimity.

Anybody who trains himself like this purifies his mind of all defilements by observing *sīla*. He does not further create defilements by guarding the doors of his sense faculties perfectly. What is needed for guarding the doors of sense faculties is wakefulness, which can be cultivated by being moderate in eating food. Wakefulness leads him to develop mindfulness (*sati*) and full awareness (*sampajañña*). When these qualities are developed, he becomes fit for practicing *jhāna* to attain concentration of mind and with this concentrated mind he sees reality as it is. Knowing the impermanent nature of all the objects

of the world he develops non-attachment (*nirveda*) to them and thus stops creating desires—the root cause of suffering. All this is done by having knowledge at the experiential level. Thus, *bhāvanāmayā paññā* goes a long way in ending one's suffering. This *paññā* also enables him to see how and where suffering is caused and also enables him to know how and where it can be ended. The philosophy of the Buddha has an action-plan. What he propounds can be practiced in life and its fruit can be achieved.

This *paññā* is developed by practicing Vipassana. This is understanding based on direct experience. This *paññā*, thus developed, enables one to walk on the Noble Eightfold Path, cuts all fetters that bind him to the wheel of birth and death and also enables him to be liberated from suffering.

Questions:

1. What is *paññā*? How many kinds of *paññās* are there? Write in detail.
2. Distinguish between *sutamayā paññā* and *cintāmayā paññā*.
3. Explain *bhāvanāmayā paññā* in detail. Bring out all its characteristics.
4. Who is fit for attaining *bhāvanāmayā paññā* and why?
5. Bring out the importance of *sīla* (moral precepts) in attaining *paññā*.
6. Who can attain concentration of mind and why?
7. Why is concentration of mind necessary for attaining *paññā*?
8. In what respects is *bhāvanāmayā paññā* different from *sutamayā* and *cintāmayā paññā*?
9. Describe in detail the path to develop *bhāvanāmayā paññā*.
10. What is right view? Explain it in detail.
11. What are *nimitta* and *anuvyañjana*? How do they create desire? Describe the mechanism how desire is caused?
12. Bring out the difference between *sati* (mindfulness) and *sampajañña* (knowledge) of the three characteristics of the objects of the world.
13. How can *bhāvanāmayā paññā* liberate one from suffering? Write in detail.
14. What is *vipassana*? How is one able to practice it?
15. Explain the characteristics of each of the five hindrances (*nīvaraṇas*).