

The Concept of *Paññā* in Buddhist Philosophy

Phramaha Banchong Phoonaphiphat¹
Phrakittisarasuthee²
Samran Kotsombat³

Abstract

This article is regarding the importance of *Paññā* in Buddhist Philosophy. It is to understand the meaning of *Paññā* correctly. The systems of Buddhist philosophy emphasize on the concept of *Paññā*: Buddhist philosophy believes “*Paññā* is the most importance in human life. Without *Paññā* a person cannot know what he ought to do, what he ought not to do, and he cannot discriminate what thing has value and what thing has no value. There are the main concepts of *Paññā* in Buddhist philosophy as follows:

(i) The meaning of *Paññā* is concerned the respective systems agree with each other that “*Sammādiṭṭhi*” is the principle of practice for the goal of Buddhist philosophy. As for the Nature of *Paññā* of Buddhist philosophy is clearly evident in line of truth of all nature that free from nescience (delusion) and craving (desire), entirely attain to salvation which means Nibbāna. The points of Buddhist departure are of the view that “*Nibbāna*” is selfless (*Anattā*.)

(ii) Buddhist philosophy is identical so far as the origin of epistemology or *Paññā* is concerned; the original source of epistemology of Buddhist philosophy is listening, reasoning, and practice (meditation).

(iii) The Kinds of epistemology or *Paññā* to Buddhist philosophy is divided into two levels, namely, the common or worldly level which originated by sense – perception and the higher or ultimate one which is originated by insight development.

(iv) The Principles of attaining liberation, Buddhist philosophy lays special emphasis on threefold Training (*Tri-sikkhā*), namely, precept (*Sīla*), concentration (*Samādhi*), and Wisdom (*Paññā*).

Keywords: *Paññā* (Wisdom), Epistemology, Buddhist Philosophy

¹Research Scholar, Faculty of Social Sciences Magadh University, Bodh-Gaya, India

²Faculty of Humanities, Mahamakut Buddhist University, Thailand

³Ph.D., Faculty of Religions and Philosophy, Mahamakut Buddhist University, Thailand

I. Introduction

Buddhist philosophy is the Non-Vedic school of Indian philosophy, it rejects the authority of Vedas and it does not accept God. Buddhist philosophy emphasizes on *Paññā*, it believes that *Paññā* is the most important instrument which can help human beings to be free from suffering. We cannot reject suffering in our life because suffering is the truth of life. There is be old age, sadness, sorrow, disease, and pain. We do not want suffering, when we are faced with suffering. What should we do to overcome suffering? We want happiness in our life. So, we must have *Paññā* for helping ourselves to pursue happiness. We can do this in a correct way because we have *Paññā*. *Paññā* is very important in human life. A wise man who has *Paññā* will not kill others. He will not steal properties of other people, he will not do wrongful activities. He always has right actions and good ideas for living in the world. Usually, the word ‘*Paññā*’ which is a knowing rightly what thing has value and what things have no value.

We attempt to study the right ways for development of ‘*Paññā*’, because we want right knowledge for developing our life in a correct way. We cannot reject that *Paññā* is the best property in the world because it can be our guiding star when we have some problems. So, in fact, when we follow the right way, then it leads to a happy life. When people live without *Paññā*, they can do wrongful activities, because they cannot discriminate between right and wrong. People who have no *Paññā* are called fools or *Bālā*. In *Maṅgala Suttas* the Buddha said that *Asevanā ca bālānaṃ* – one should not associate with fools. In this standpoint, a person should not associate with fools, and avoid contact with fools who can be recognized in three aspects, as it is said in the *Suttas*:

“Monks, these are the marks of a fool, signs of a fool, stamps of a fool. What are three? As to this, monks, a fool is one thinking wrong thoughts, speaking wrong words, a doer of deeds wrongly.” (M. III. 163.)

For this, the Buddha recommends us that there are three behaviours of a foolish person, the first behaviour of a fool is one thinking wrong thoughts, that means a foolish person is always thinking about ways of *duccarita* or *akusala*. Many *akusala* ideas are in his or her mind every time, because he or she lives in the world without *Hiri* and *Ottappa*. In this statement, *Hiri* means shame at doing evil, and *Ottappa* means fear of the results of doing evil. He or she is coveting others’ possessions (*Lobha*), he or she is thinking of harming others (*byāpāda*), and he or she has wrong understanding which is not in line with Dhamma. So, three kinds of wrong thoughts are called “*Manoduccarita*”.

The second behaviour of a foolish person is one speaking wrong words, that means he or she who is a fool likes to speak wrong words which are not true speech, which are useless and also are called “*Vacīduccarita*”. In this point, what kind of *vacīduccarita* is a false speech? The four kinds of *vacīduccarita* are:

- a) Telling lies,
- b) Speech which provokes anger and discord,
- c) Coarse speech,
- d) Talking nonsensically and pointlessly. (A. V: 281.)

A fool usually likes telling lies (*musāvāda*), he or she likes speaking for provoking anger and discord (*pisuṇavācā*), he or she likes to speak coarse speech (*pharusavācā*), and he or she likes to talk nonsensically and pointlessly (*samphappalāpa*).

And the third behaviour of a fool is always one doing wrong deeds. In this standpoint, a fool actually is doing *kāyaduccarita* without *Hiri* and *Ottappa*. What kind of *kāyaduccarita* is a bad activity? The three kinds of *kāyaduccarita* are:

- a) Killing beings (*pāṇātipāta*),
- b) Stealing and cheating (*adinnādāna*),
- c) Improper sexual behaviour (*kāmesumicchāchāra*). (A. V: 281.)

For this statement, a fool can kill beings easily because he is not compassionate without loving-kindness (*mettā*), he or she can steal and cheat properties of other people, he or she can do improper sexual behaviour without *Hiri* and *Ottappa*. In the Buddha's teaching, we should not associate with fools, because they will suggest us wrong ways by bad bodily behaviour which is called *kāyaduccarita*. If we associate with them, our behaviour will be bad automatically. Because of living with fools will affect human behaviour, one is identified by the company one keeps, as attested by the dictum: *yam ve sevati tādiso* "One is like the company one keeps." Therefore, the Buddha said that *Asevanā ca bālānam* - One should not associate with fools.

Therefore, Buddhist philosophy emphasizes on *Paññā*. *Paññā* is the most important instrument which can eliminate suffering. *Paññā* is the antidote to the self-chosen poison of ignorance. And the ultimate goal of *Paññā* is enlightenment, and it also leads to peace in the present life.

Our purpose is to make a study of the concept of *Paññā* with special reference to Buddhist philosophy. This study specifically studies the concept of *Paññā*. Usually, *Visuddhi-Paññā* will be developed by morality which is called 'Sīla', and concentration which is called 'Samādhi'. Certainly, *Paññā* is a knowing about all those things which should be known. And *Paññā* is a knowing all about what things have value and what things have no value. (A : III ; 127)

II. The Concept of *Paññā* in Buddhist Philosophy:

Now we will study the concept of *Paññā* in Buddhist philosophy. The meaning and significance of the word "*Paññā*" will be explained in the following section.

The Meaning and Significance of *Paññā*

The term '*Paññā*' consists of two components- '*Pa*' and '*Ñā*'. Here, the word '*Pa*' is a prefix denoting the sense of proper, full, exact, right etc. And the word '*ñā*' is a root with its verbal form as '*Jānana*', which means to know, to understand or to comprehend, and to penetrate. Thus, the literal meaning of the word '*Paññā*' is to know, to understand, to comprehend or to penetrate fully and thoroughly but in the Buddhist philosophy, it has been used in a specific sense, which convey the sense of knowledge there are three terms. These terms are: (1). *Saññā* which means perception, (2). *Viññāṇa* which means consciousness and (3). *Paññā* which means right understanding.

In Buddhist philosophy, it emphasizes on finding, what is knowledge? It is the most important question in both western and eastern thoughts. Knowledge means vision according to reality, the Four Noble Truths; *dukkha*, *dukkha-samudaya*, *dukkha-nirodha*, and *magga*. The ultimate goal of this knowledge is salvation (*Nibbāna*) from ignorance. *Nibbāna* is freedom from all *kilesas*. It is freedom of mind without lust (*rāga*), hatred (*dosa*), and delusion (*moha*).

In *Abhidhanappathīpikā* and *Abhidhanappathīpikāsūji* there are 22 synonyms of knowledge or *Paññā*, these are as follow;

1. *Dhī* - *Paññā* which maintains benefit
2. *Paññā* - Thoroughly knowing all things which should be known
3. *Buddhi* - *Paññā* is for enlightenment
4. *Methā* - *Paññā* is for destroying *kilesa*
5. *Mati* - Thought, View, Vision
6. *Muti* - Understanding
7. *Bhūri* - *Paññā* is wide as land
8. *Mantā* - Knowledge in religious doctrine
9. *Paññāna* - It has the same meaning as *Paññā* but different form.
10. *Ñāṇa* - This word use to mix with *dassana* which means knowing *Tilakkhaṇa* or knowledge which arises through *Samādhi* namely ‘*Dibbacakkhu*’
11. *Vijjā* - Three kinds of knowledge these are as follows: 1) Vedanta
2) Arts and Sciences and 3) Knowledge which gained through *Samādhi*
12. *Yoni* - Knowledge which arises from knowing reason, in other word, it is *Yonisomanasikāra* which means critical reflection.
13. *Patibhāṇa* - Skill, Proficiency
14. *Vipassanā* - *Paññā* which sees *Tilakkhaṇa*
15. *Sammādiṭṭhi* - Right View, Right Vision
16. *Vimaṃsā* - *Paññā* which investigates *Dhamma*, or truth-investigation
17. *Sampajañña* - Clear comprehension
18. *Nepakka* - *Paññā* which keeps oneself
19. *Vedanā* - Knowing feelings
20. *Takka* - Logical reflection
21. *Vitakka* - Logical thought
22. *Saṅkappa* - Right thought is the wholesome thought (*Kusala-vitukka*).

These words are the meanings of knowledge, these all are synonyms of knowledge and for clearly understanding I will explain the words which are related with the term ‘*Paññā*’ in Buddhist philosophy, these are as follows:

1. Kosala or Kosalla

The word ‘*Kosala*’ means skill, proficiency (Phra Dhammapitaka, 1995, p. 99) which is the character of higher knowledge. There are three kinds of *kosala* these are as follows:

- 1) *Āyakosala* - It means the skill which is the skill in growth, knowing the ways of the growth, and knowing causes of the growth.

2) *Apāyakosala* - It means the skill in ruin or knowing causes of ruin which is called '*Apāyamukha*'.

3) *Upāyakosala* - It means the skill in secret which is the method of solution and secret which is the Path of accomplishment or basis of success which is called '*Iddhipāda*'.

2. *Pariññā*

The word '*Pariññā*' means knowing, regarding, contemplating, investigating or full understanding. There are three kinds of *Pariññā* as follows:

1) *Ñātapariññā* - To know it by becoming known thing, to know steps of knowing, to know characteristics of known thing that means knowing only that thing correctly, for example, he knows this is *vedanā*, *vedanā* is the knowing feeling.

2) *Tīraṇapariññā* - To know it by considering, to know it with *Tilakkhaṇa*, which means knowing it, considering it that is *Aniccatā*, *Dukkhatā* and *Anattatā*, for example, to know that *vedanā* is impermanence and it is non-self.

3) *Pahānapariññā* - To know it by abandoning, to know it by cutting the ways of *chandarāga* in that thing, that means knowing it is *Aniccatā*, *Dukkhatā* and *Anattatā*, then he abandons *niccasaññā* which is self (*Attā*).

3. *Dhammavicaya*

The word '*Dhammavicaya*' means investigation *Dhamma* or truth-investigation which is rightly investigation that thing with *Paññā*, for example, a person contemplates that thing for understanding its meaning, then he investigates its useful *Dhamma* for his life and mind, or he chooses the best thing in that situation or he sees its characteristic that is arising, existing and falling (A moment of the arising, A moment of the existing and A moment of the cessation), his knowledge is for contemplation, he understands everything in the world which is arising, existing and falling, anything cannot sustain forever, and he is seeing *Ariyasacca*.

4. *Bodhi*

The word '*Bodhi*' means *Paññā* is for enlightenment, it is the highest *Paññā* in Buddhism, the word 'Enlightenment' means real knowledge, thorough knowledge, namely that knowledge is an absolute truth or ultimate truth (*Ariyasacca* or *Saccadhamma*).

5. *Aññā*

The term '*Aññā*' is enlightenment or attaining Arahantahood.

6. *Abhiññā*

The word '*Abhiññā*' is a supernormal knowledge, ultra-conscious insight. And the term '*Abhiññā*' consists of two components- '*Abhi*' and '*Ñā*', here, '*Abhi*' is a prefix denoting the sense of proper, full, exact, right, biggest etc. '*Ñā*' is a root with its verbal form as '*Paññā*'. *Abhiññā* is a knowledge which must have basis of study for developing *Paññā*, namely the study is the practicing of *Sila*, *Samādhi* and *Paññā*. Buddhist philosophy identified supernormal knowledge which is called '*Abhiññā*.' According to the Suttas, the meditator who has attained and mastered the fourth *Jhāna* is sometimes shown as proceeding to attain certain kind of supernormal knowledge. These modes of higher knowledge are presented in different sets which we can find the Six *Abhiññās*, these are as follows:

1. *Iddhividhā*; the knowledge of the modes of supernormal power,
2. *Dibbasota*; the divine ear-element,
3. *Cetopariyañāṇa*; the knowledge of others' minds,
4. *Pubbenivāsānussati*; the knowledge of recollecting previous lives,
5. *Dibbacakkhu* or *Cutūpapatañāṇa*; the knowledge of the passing away and rebirth of beings,
6. *Āsavakkhayañāṇa*; the knowledge of the destruction of the cankers (D. III; 281; A. III; 280).

From the above statements the first five are called mundane modes of direct knowledge (*Lokiya abhiññā*), the sixth is called the supramundane direct knowledge (*Lokuttara abhiññā*). Only *Āsavakkhayañāṇa* which is ultimate truth and it also is only this *Paññā* which means *Ñāṇa* which can quell kilesa and cease suffering. When a person had this *Ñāṇa*, he already attained *Nibbāna*. Only those whose general behaviour is in accordance with this standard *Paññā* can be called “Arahant” and regarded as “enlightened man”.

In Buddhism there are three different kinds of knowledge, these three are...

1) *Saññā* is a remembering so that one recognizes – in other words, remembering forms (*rūpa*), sounds, smells, tastes, touch and mental objects, is called *Saññā*, and this *Saññā* can know that is *rūpa*, that *rūpa* is only green or yellow but cannot understand *Tilakkhaṇa* of that *rūpa*.

2) *Viññāṇa* is the awareness of sense objects (*ārammaṇa*) at the moment when, for instance, forms (*rūpa*) contact the eyes, is called *Viññāṇa*, and *Viññāṇa* knows only objects that is *rūpa*, that *rūpa* is green or yellow and it can understand *Tilakkhaṇa* of that *rūpa* but cannot comprehend arising and appearance of *Magga*.

3) *Paññā* is a thorough knowing all about what things have value and what things have no value, (A. IV; 5.). *Paññā* is to understand the real states of various thing, and *Paññā* also knows objects and can penetrate to *Tilakkhaṇa* of objects and it also can comprehend arising and appearance of *Magga*. And this *Paññā* can attain *Nibbāna*.

III. The Kinds and Source of *Paññā*

In Buddhist philosophy the word ‘*Paññā*’ has various kinds in different contexts. But we will see some of its kinds, these are as follows:

The Two kinds of *Paññā*

The first category deals there are two kinds of *Paññā* in Buddhist philosophy. These are as follows:

1. *Lokiya-Paññā* (worldly *Paññā*) and
2. *Lokuttara-Paññā* (transcendental *Paññā*).

In summary, if any *Paññās* which are for the purpose of fortune, rank and authority, praise, sensually exciting and stimulating the mind, increasing *Dukkha*, accumulating *Kilesa*, wanting much, being lazy and idle, then we should know that these kinds of *Paññā* are neither *Lokuttara-Paññā*, nor the *Buddha Dhamma*, nor the Teaching of the “Great Teacher”. And *Lokiya-Paññā* is for an existence of lust, anger, and delusion. It

is for grasping and clinging to everything.

If, on the other words, these *Paññās*, whatever they may be, are for the purpose of diminishing excitement, which are for the purpose of becoming free from *dukkha*, which are for the purpose of non-accumulation of *kilesa*, which are for the purpose of wanting little, which are for the purpose of being contented and happy with what we already have, which are for the purpose of diligent effort, which are for the purpose of being easy to look after and help, then we should know that these kinds of *Paññās* are *Lokuttara-Paññā*, these are the *Buddha dhamma* and also are the Teachings of the “Great Teacher”. And *Lokuttara-Paññā* is for absence lust (*rāga*), anger (*dosa*) and delusion (*moha*). It is above good and evils.

The Original Source of *Paññā*

According to the *Dīghanikāya*, there are also three kinds of original source of wisdom (*Paññā*) in Buddhist philosophy, these are as follows:

1. *Sutamaya-Paññā*; wisdom which gained from listening,
2. *Cintāmayā-Paññā*; wisdom which gained through thinking, and
3. *Bhāvanāmayā-Paññā*; wisdom which gained by doing or development, by experience. (D. III., p. 219)

Thus, it is evident that for the spiritual perfection it is absolutely necessary for the human beings to be endowed with *Trisikkhā* in a correct way.

IV. Conclusion

The process of the study and the practicing of the Threefold Training or *Trisikkhā*, the Buddha advised his disciples to first establish themselves in training morality before entering the other two states of concentration and *Paññā*. And this shows that significance of the study and the practice of *Sīla* which the Buddha teaches the role of the guide along the Eightfold Path to help followers learn and practice the Threefold Training until they reach the ultimate aim of life, namely, *Nibbāna* which is the ultimate goal of Buddhist philosophy. And *Nibbāna* is non-self (*Anattā*). *Paññā* - wisdom which sees rightly that: “this is *dukkha!*”; “this is a arising of *dukkha!*”; “this is a ceasing of *dukkha!*”; “this is the way leading to the ceasing of *dukkha!*” – is given the name “*Magga*” because it includes the component practices for reaching the cessation of suffering. And By completely quelling *taṇhā*, *dukkha* is quelled and ceased. This is called “*Nirodha*”, because it is the cessation of *dukkha*. The nature of *Paññā* is pure and clean from defilements which mean ignorance and delusion.

Therefore, *Paññā* is like the most important instrument for developing mind. Our mind will be pure and clean with *Paññā*. And this *Paññā* must be only the highest *Paññā* or ultimate truth, but it is not worldly knowledge or conventional truth. A wise person should follow affinity and live in the world freely by *Paññā*.

References

- Bhikkhuni T.N. Tin Lien. (1996). **Concept of Dhammapada**. Delhi: Eastern Book Linkers.
- E.M. Hare. (2006). **The Book of The Gradual Sayings (Aṅguttara-Nikāya) or More-Numbered Suttas**. New Delhi: Jainendra Prakash Jain.
- E.M. Hare. (2006). **The Book of The Gradual Sayings (Dīgha-Nikāya)**. New Delhi: Jainendra Prakash Jain At Shri Jainendra Press.
- I. B. Horner. (2004). **The Collection of Middle Length Sayings (Majjhimnikaya). 3 Vols**. London: Mortilal Banarsidass.
- S. S. Thera. (1914). **Dhammapada. Ed. & Tr.** by Muller. F. Max. S.B.E. Vol. 1. 5. The Dhammapada. Ed. London: Pali Text society.
- T.W. Rhys Davids and William Stede. (1997). **Pali-English Dictionary**. Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal.
- Phra Dhammapitaka (Prayudh Payutto). (1995). **Dictionary of Buddhism: Numerical Dhammas**. 8th ed. Bangkok: Mahachulalongkorn Press.