

Buddhist wisdom terminology

This article is an introductory summary of the teachings of Zen Master Thích Thông Triệt on the topic, mainly based on the oral teaching of Bhikkhuni Zen Master Thích Nữ Triệt Như given for the Intermediate Meditation Course Level 1. For a comprehensive in-depth understanding, the reader is encouraged to attend the complete nine-seminar teaching program and read the writings of Master Thích Thông Triệt that are being progressively translated into English.

Introduction

Developmental Buddhism posits that true paññā wisdom inherently exists in any human being who has eschewed all false and illusionary forms, all yearning forms and all true or false forms. Therefore, people who think, or use the reasoning faculty of the intellect or the dualistic differentiating mind will not be able to manifest their true paññā wisdom. This is also a principle for developing the catalyst that will bring paññā wisdom into existence. If one wishes to walk through the gate of paññā wisdom, one's mind must be in the state of "suchness". Therefore, suchness is the principal foundation that enables paññā wisdom to exist, it is the catalyst that brings paññā wisdom into being. But to understand the meaning of paññā wisdom, we need to first go to the etymology of paññā (Sanskrit: prajñā).

Meaning of Paññā

Paññā (in Pāli) or *prajñā* (in Sanskrit), and their phonetic rendering *bát nhã* in Chinese and Vietnamese have become common terms used in Buddhism and Zen Buddhism. They convey the meaning of transcendental wisdom, a wisdom higher than what is commonly understood and which is classified as superior spiritual wisdom.

The word *paññā* or *prajñā* consists of two components: *ññā* or *jñā* meaning knowledge or insight (*ñāṇa* or *jñāna*) and the prefix *pa* or *pra* meaning complete. The addition of the prefix *pa* or *pra* indicates that *paññā* means a higher form of knowledge than *ñāṇa*. Therefore, *paññā* is defined as transcendental, complete and all-vanquishing wisdom. It is also called spontaneous wisdom. *Paññā* is also often used to indicate Buddha nature, i.e. our human potential for enlightenment, and the insight that leads to enlightenment.

Paññā Wisdom and Knowledge-Insight

Chinese Buddhist translators attempted to differentiate *paññā* from *ñāṇa*, and by the 7th century the great Tang dynasty Buddhist monk and translator, Xuanzang, used two different words to clearly differentiate them: "*hui*" (Vietnamese: *hệ*) for *paññā* and *chih* (Vietnamese: *trí*) for *ñāṇa*. *Paññā* is commonly translated into English as "wisdom" whereas *ñāṇa* is translated as knowledge-insight.

Paññā wisdom refers to the highest form of wisdom. People have the ability to attain *paññā* wisdom through specific practice methods that go beyond the realm of reflection or contemplation. *Paññā* wisdom is wisdom that springs up spontaneously. It does not come from learning; it is novel, creative, and intuitive. It also generates benevolence, compassion, empathetic joy, equanimity, and eloquence. People are capable of achieving *paññā* wisdom by meditating on themes that go beyond logical reasoning and using wordless awareness, by internalizing transcendental topics such as suchness, emptiness, and illusion. *Paññā* wisdom is also considered to emanate from the Buddha mind completely cleansed of all mental defilements.

Knowledge-Insight has two levels.

The first level of knowledge-insight corresponds to a state of mind characterized by "views" or "opinions" that are essentially driven by craving. Bias, prejudice, fixed opinions and underlying tendencies are formed as a result. This knowledge is derived from learning and life experiences. It is based on language and embodies mental defilements, old habits, fetters and underlying tendencies; for these reasons it is called worldly knowledge.

The second level of knowledge-insight is based on the awakened intellect. It is still based on language, since it is generated by learning the Buddha's teachings, but these teachings have resulted in a reformed mind as well as reduced and isolated mental defilements, old habits, fetters and underlying tendencies. At this stage, one has started to change one's karma. This level of knowledge is often called Insight to differentiate it from the worldly knowledge stage, and is associated with the Pāli word *vipassanā* meaning "insight contemplation". The "Not Labeling Objects" technique that we learn in the Fundamental Meditation Course is an example of seeing using insight. In the Intermediate Meditation Course, we will learn another method called the "As-It-Is" method that the Buddha taught in his discourses.

Knowledge and Paññā Wisdom Faculty

Buddhist texts mention the knowledge faculty and the *paññā* wisdom faculty. The Pāli word for faculty is *indriya*. Buddhism

mentions the six faculties with which a person can perceive the world, comprising the five senses and the mind.

The Knowledge faculty, or *ñāṇīndriya* in Pāli, is the inherent capacity that generates knowledge and insight. It is located in the pre-frontal cortex of the brain.

The paññā wisdom faculty, or *paññīndriya* in Pāli, is the inherent capacity that generates paññā wisdom. It is located in the left rear hemisphere of the brain. The paññā wisdom faculty is associated with samādhi stillness. The samādhi stillness faculty, or *samādhīndriya* in Pāli, is also located in the left rear hemisphere of the brain.

Summary

Paññā and associated words refer to a form of knowing that is higher than the knowing achieved by the thinking mind, the intellect and consciousness. Once this transcendental faculty is active, we can develop the right view, the right knowledge, and the insightful cognition to see the true nature of worldly phenomena and see them as they “presently are”. This view is not tainted by the conflicts that arise from the worldly mind and from dualistic discrimination.

Paññā wisdom is knowing without thinking and discrimination, but with the intuitive and analytical faculty of our enlightenment potential. It is not reached by developing consciousness to its highest level but by developing our enlightenment potential – our Buddha nature. This enlightenment potential is inherent in wordless awareness. Its knowing does not see duality, it is not bound by attachment, and it does not have the idea of “self, me, I”. Around this common theme, there are several words in Buddhist texts that express the ideas of knowledge and paññā wisdom. Students need to clearly see the difference between knowledge and paññā wisdom, and between the various forms of knowing.

