

The Method of Cultivation Bhāvanāmayapaññā in Visuddhimagga

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Abstract

This article aims to explain the method of cultivation of Bhāvanāmayapaññā in Visuddhimagga. The objectives of this article are of two Objectives: (1) to study Bhāvanāmayapaññā in the Visuddhimagga, and (2) to analyze the method of cultivation of Bhāvanāmayapaññā in Visuddhimagga. Bhāvanāmayapaññā is one of three kinds of knowledges found in the Theravāda Buddhist scriptures. Those three kinds of knowledge are Sutamayapaññā (knowledge comes from hearing), Cintāmayapaññā (knowledge comes from thinking) and Bhāvanāmayapaññā (knowledge comes from meditation practice). According to the Theravāda Buddhist scriptures, all of three kinds of knowledge can lead to the end of suffering. As Samādhi Bhāvanā (mental absorption) is related with the cultivation of Bhāvanāmayapaññā, therefore, one specific discourse called Samādhi Bhāvanā Sutta and the Jhāna Sutta are taken into account to explain and to examine the Sutta contents which will pave the way to understand about the cultivation of Bhāvanāmayapaññā in the Theravāda Buddhist scriptures.

Keywords: Cultivation; Bhāvanāmayapaññā; Visuddhimagga; Theravāda Buddhist scripture

Introduction

Bhāvanāmayapaññā is an experiential knowledge gained through the practice of meditation. The various subjects and methods of meditation expounded in the Theravada Buddhist scriptures, the Pali Canon and its commentaries divide meditation into two inter-related systems. One is called the development of serenity (*samathabhāvanā*), the other the development of insight (*vipassanābhāvanā*). The former also goes under the name of development of concentration (*samādhībhāvanā*), the latter the development of wisdom (*paññabhāvanā*).

The practice of serenity meditation aims at developing a calm, concentrated, unified mind as a means of experiencing inner peace and as a basis for wisdom. The practice of insight meditation aims at gaining a direct understanding of the real nature of phenomena. Of the two, the development of insight is regarded by Buddhism as the essential key to liberation, the direct antidote to the ignorance underlying bondage and suffering. Whereas serenity meditation is recognized as common to both Buddhist and non-Buddhist contemplative disciplines, insight meditation is held to be the unique discovery of the Buddha and an unparalleled feature of his path. However, because the growth of insight presupposes a certain degree of concentration, and serenity meditation helps to achieve this, the development of serenity also claims an incontestable place in the Buddhist meditative process. Together the two types of meditation work to make the mind a fit instrument for enlightenment. With his mind unified by means of the development of serenity, made sharp and bright by the development of insight, the meditator can proceed unobstructed to reach the end of suffering, *Nibbāna*.

The Etymology of Paññā

The root ‘jñā’¹ can be translated as “consciousness”, “knowledge”, or “understanding”; and the prefix ‘pra’² is an intensifier which can be translated as “higher”, “greater”, “supreme” or “premium”³, or “being born or springing up”⁴, referring to a spontaneous type of knowing.⁵ Therefore, ‘prajñā’⁶ or ‘paññā’⁷ is often translated as “wisdom”, but is closer in meaning to “insight”, “non-discriminating knowledge”, or “intuitive apprehension”.⁸

The Meaning of Paññā

The meaning of paññā is intelligence, comprising all the higher faculties of cognition, “intellect as conversant with general truths”⁹, reason, wisdom, insight, knowledge, and recognition.¹⁰ Paññā is the fourth virtue of ten Theravāda pāramis, and the sixth of the six Mahāyāna pāramitās. In the Pāli, paññā is concentrated insight into the three characteristics of all things, namely: impermanence, dissatisfaction or suffering, and non-self, and the four noble truths.¹¹ In the 5th century A.D. exegetical work Visuddhimagga, one

¹ Monier-Williams, p. 425.

² Ibid., p. 652.

³ David Loy, **Nonduality: A Study in Comparative Philosophy**, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), p. 136.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Sanskrit word.

⁷ Pāli word.

⁸ Damien Keown, **A Dictionary of Buddhism**, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 218.

⁹ T. W. and C. A. F. Rhys Davids, trsl., **Dialogues of the Buddha**, Vol. II, (London: PTS, 1899), p. 68.

¹⁰ Mrs. Rh. D. “Buddhism” (1914) pp. 94, 130, 201.

¹¹ Steven Collins, **Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities**, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 140; Richard Gombrich, **Theravāda Buddhism**, (Routledge, 2006), p. 47. , Quote: “All phenomenal existence [in Buddhism] is said to have three interlocking characteristics: impermanence, suffering and lack of soul or essence”; Carl Olson, **The Different Paths of Buddhism: A Narrative-Historical Introduction**, (Rutgers University Press, 2005), pp. 63–64.

of the most revered books in Theravada Buddhism, Buddhaghosa states that the function of 'paññā' is "to abolish the darkness of delusion".¹²

In early Theravāda Buddhist texts, paññā is defined more precisely as *yatha-bhutaṃ-ñāṇa-dassanaṃ*, seeing things as they are, not as they appear to be. That is, understanding the true nature of body and mind processes through *aniccaṃ* (impermanence), *dukkhaṃ* (suffering) and *anattā* (non-self). It may also be described as "pakarena janati'ti paññāpakarena janati'ti paññā" (because it is understood through different angles, so it is paññā). The *Visuddhimagga* elaborates on this and explain that the characteristic of paññā is to penetrate the true nature of things. Its function is to dispel the darkness of ignorance, and prevent one from becoming bewildered by its manifestation. Its immediate cause is concentration (*samādhi*). Hence the words 'He whose mind is concentrated knows and sees things according to reality'.

The Three Kinds of Paññā

The Buddhist scriptures mention three types of paññā: *sutamayapaññā*, *cintāmayapaññā* and *bhāvanāmayapaññā*. *Sutamayapaññā* is wisdom obtained from listening to others, from being instructed by others about impermanence, suffering and essencelessness. It may also develop from reading sacred texts. This type of paññā is clearly dependent on an external source.

Sutamayapaññā consists of learning which has been gained by listening to others (*parato sutva patilabhati*). Such wisdom is *parokkha* (inferred knowledge). According to explanation in *Abhidhammapitaka Vibhanga* and *Visuddhimagga*, *Sutamayapaññā* and *cintāmayāpaññā* can lead to *Saccanulomikayana* so both kinds of knowledge can lead to liberation. The early Commentaries understood *parato ghoso* as referring to the wisdom of one who hears Dharma in the presence of the Ariyas (that is, the Saints who are nearing enlightenment or already enlightened).¹³ More likely than not,

¹² Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli, **The Path of Purification: Visuddhimagga**, (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1999), p. 437.

¹³ SnA 166.

especially when one listens to an Ariya with an open mind, this mere act of receptive listening was sufficient to trigger liberating wisdom, if not enlightenment itself, in oneself.

Cintā is derived from the verb root ‘cit’, the act of thinking.¹⁴ The meaning of “cintāmayāpaññā”¹⁵ is the understanding acquired without hearing from another is that consisting in what is reasoned because it is produced by one’s own reasoning.¹⁶ This definition on the “cintāmayāpaññā” of Visuddhimagga refer to “Pacceka buddha”¹⁷. The meaning of Pacceka buddha is an “Individually Enlightened One”. This is a term for an Arahant who has realized Nibbāna without having heard the Buddha’s doctrine from others. He comprehends the Four Noble Truths individually (pacceka), independent of any teacher, by his own effort. Therefore, he does not have the capacity to proclaim the teachings effectively to others and does not have the capacity to become a teacher of Gods and Men. According to tradition, they do not arise while the Teaching of a Perfect Buddha is known.¹⁸

The Pali term bhāvanāmayapaññā means experiential wisdom. Bhāvanā is referred to meditation through which wisdom (paññā) is cultivated. In order to understand the essence of the term bhāvanāmayapaññā, we first need to understand the meaning of the term paññā. Paññā is derived from the root ‘na’ which means ‘to know’, prefixed by ‘pa’ meaning ‘correctly’. Thus, the literal English translation of the word paññā is ‘to know correctly’. Commonly used equivalents are such words as ‘insight’, ‘knowledge’ or ‘wisdom’. All these convey aspects of paññā, but, as with all Pali terms, no translation corresponds exactly.

¹⁴ T. W. Rhys Davids, **William Stede, Pali-English Dictionary**, (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Private Limited, 1997), s. v ‘cintā’, p. 268.

¹⁵ Wisdom by means of thinking; The Book of Analysis, p. 410.

¹⁶ This knowledge of thinking would have been referred to the Pacceka buddha. The meaning of Pacceka buddha is a self enlightened person without hearing the teaching from others.

¹⁷ Pug, 29; A II 56; M 116; D 16.

¹⁸ BD, s. v. pacceka buddha.

The method of cultivation of Bhāvanāmayapaññā

The Samādhi Bhāvanā Sutta¹⁹ mentions four uses of mental concentration (samādhi), namely, (1) for happiness here and now; (2) for the divine eye (clairvoyance and knowledge of the working of karma); (3) mindfulness and full awareness; and (4) spiritual liberation. The method for each of these Samādhi is as follows: the perception of light, the perception of impermanence, the rise and fall of the aggregates.

1. The Four Jhānas

The four jhāna are here stated as being for the purpose of dwelling happily here and now refers to right concentration (sammā samādhi), which, after all, is defined as the four jhānas. In terms of the noble eightfold path, the dhyanas play a major role in propelling the focusses of mindfulness (satipaṭṭhāna) from the mundane to the supramundane level of path-entry. The dhyanic mind is so calm and clear that, on emerging from it, the temporarily defilement-free mind can easily focus itself to penetrate to see true reality.

1) The First Jhāna

In several suttas, descriptions of the jhānas are elaborated and embellished with beautiful similes.²⁰ These images and metaphors serve two functions. The first is to elucidate the nature of the jhana experience, shedding further light on the standard definitions. The similes highlight that jhana is not a state in which awareness of the body has been lost. Rather than losing connection with the body as one enters jhana, the meditator gains heightened awareness of it as the jhana factors gradually develop and suffuse throughout the body. The standard definition of the first jhana to illustrate how the associated factors of pleasure and rapture are strengthened by permeating them throughout the body:

¹⁹ A. II. 44-46.

²⁰ AN 6.50.

Quite secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unwholesome states, a monk enters and abides in the first jhana [which is characterized by] rapture and pleasure born of seclusion, and accompanied by thought and examination. He makes the rapture and pleasure born of seclusion drench, steep, fill, and pervade this body, so that there is no part of his whole body unpervaded by the rapture and pleasure born of seclusion. Just as a skilled bath man or a bath man's apprentice heaps bath powder in a metal basin and, sprinkling it gradually with water, kneads it till the moisture wets his ball of bath powder, soaks it and pervades it inside and out, yet the ball itself does not ooze; so too, a bhikkhu makes the rapture and pleasure born of seclusion drench, steep, fill, and pervade this body, so that there is no part of his whole body unpervaded by the rapture and pleasure born of seclusion.²¹

The Degrees of the First Jhāna

A person is reached among the retinue of Brahmā (Brahmā-parisajja-deva) by the attainment of minor degree of the first jhāna.²² A person is reached among the advisors of Brahmā (brahma-purohita devas) by the attainment of medium degree of the first jhāna.²³ A person is reached among the Devas of great Brahmā (mahā-Brahmā) by the attainment of highest degree of the first jhāna.²⁴

Some persons secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unwholesome states, some person enters and dwells in the first jhāna, which consists of rapture and pleasure born of seclusion, accompanied by thought and examination. He relishes it, desires it, and finds satisfaction in it. If he is firm in it, focused on it, often dwells in it, and has not lost it when he dies, he is reborn in companionship with the devas of Brahmā's company. The life span of devas of Brahmā's company is an eon. The first jhāna may be of an

²¹ Richard Shankman, **The Experience of Samādhi: An In-depth Exploration of Buddhist Meditation**, pp. 36-37.

²² A II 126.

²³ A II 126.

²⁴ A II 126; F. L. Woodward, tr., **The Book of the Gradual Sayings (Aṅguttara-nikāya)**, Vol. II, (Oxford: PTS, 1995), p. 130.

inferior grade, a middling grade, and a superior grade. For those reborn through an inferior grade, the life span is a third of an eon; for those reborn through the middling grade, the life span is half an eon; and for those reborn through a superior grade, the life span is an eon.²⁵

The worldling remains there all his life, and when he has completed the entire life span of those devas, he goes to hell, to the animal realm, or to the sphere of afflicted spirits.²⁶ But the Blessed One's disciple remains there all his life, and when he has completed the entire life span of those devas, he attains final Nibbāna in that very same state of existence.²⁷ A meditator when develops or attains in the minor degree of the first jhāna, he is designated as Brahmā-parisajja deva.²⁸ Respectively, a meditator when attains in the medium degree of the first jhāna, he is designated and born among the advisors of Brahmā (brahma-purohita devas),²⁹ when he attains in the highest degree of the first jhāna, he is designated and born among the great Brahmā (mahā-brahmā).³⁰

2) The Second Jhāna

With the stilling of initial application and sustained application, by gaining inner tranquillity and oneness of mind, he attains and dwells in the second jhāna, free from initial application and sustained application, accompanied by zest and happiness born of concentration.

The Degrees of the Second Jhāna

A person is reached among the Devas of Limited Radiance (parittabha devas) by the attainment of minor degree of the second jhāna.³¹ The worldling remains there all his life, and when he has completed the entire life span of

²⁵ Vibh 422-426.

²⁶ A II 126; F. L. Woodward, tr., **The Book of the Gradual Sayings (Aṅguttara-nikāya)**, Vol. II, (Oxford: PTS, 1995), p. 130.

²⁷ A II 126.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

those devas, he goes to hell, to the animal realm, or to the sphere of afflicted spirits. But the Blessed One's disciple remains there all his life, and when he has completed the entire life span of those devas, he attains final Nibbāna in that very same state of existence.³² A person is born among the Devas of Limited Radiance (parittabha devas) by the attainment of minor degree of the second jhāna.³³ A person is born among the Devas of Unbounded Radiance (appamanabha devas) by the attainment of medium degree of the second jhāna.³⁴ A person is born among the Devas of Streaming Radiance (abhassara devas) by the attainment of highest degree of the second jhāna.³⁵

3) The Third Jhāna

With the fading away of zest, he remains equanimous, mindful and clearly knowing, and experiences happiness with the body. He attains and dwells in the third jhāna, of which the noble ones declare, 'Happily he dwells in equanimity and mindfulness.'

The Degrees of the Third Jhāna

A person is reached among the Devas of Limited Glory (parittasubha devas) by the attainment of minor degree of the third jhāna. A person is reached among the Devas of Unbounded Glory (appamanasubha devas) by the attainment of medium degree of the third jhāna. A person is reached among the Devas of Refulgent Glory (subhakinna devas) by the attainment of highest degree of the third jhāna.

4) The Fourth Jhāna

With the abandoning of pleasure and pain and with the earlier disappearance of happiness and displeasure, he attains and dwells in the fourth jhāna, that is neither painful nor pleasant, and with mindfulness fully purified by equanimity. Vibhaṅga states:

³² A II 127. F. L. Woodward, tr., **The Book of the Gradual Sayings (Aṅguttara-nikāya)**, Vol. II, p. 131.

³³ A II 126.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

“With the abandoning of pleasure and pain and with the previous disappearance of joy and grief he enters upon and dwells in the fourth jhāna, which has neither-pain-nor-pleasure and has purity of mindfulness due to equanimity” and so he has attained the fourth jhāna.³⁶

2. The Perception of Light

The perception of light (*āloka saññā*) here is prescribed for the attainment of “knowledge and vision,” defined as the divine eye (that is, the psychic power of clairvoyance and the knowledge of the working of kamma and rebirth).³⁷ However, the perception of light is also efficacious in a more mundane way, such as the overcoming of drowsiness, as prescribed in the Pacalā Sutta.³⁸ In psychological terms, the perception of light is also useful in keeping the mind “bright” in a positive sense, which prevents or cures depressive and negative mental states.

Here, bhikkhus, a monk attends to the perception of light (*āloka saññā*),³⁹ determine the perception of daylight: just as day is, so is night; just as night is, so is day. Thus through a mind that is open and unhindered, you should cultivate a mind of bright light.

3. The Perception of Impermanence

The perception of impermanence (*anicca saññā*) is a very simple and efficacious practice that promotes mindfulness and full awareness by way of watching the most fundamental characteristic of all conditioned things, that is, impermanence. This practice prevents the mind from being distracted by any of the senses, and if the mind is distracted, the distraction is easily abandoned by reflecting on its impermanent nature. As stated in the Okkanti Saṃyutta, this perception is efficacious in bringing about streamwinning in this life itself. For a monk there is understanding regarding feelings as they arise, as they remain active, as they pass away; there is understanding regarding

³⁶ Vibh 245.

³⁷ S. I. 82f.

³⁸ A. IV. 86.

³⁹ A. III. 323.

perception as they arise, as they remain active, as they pass away; there is understanding regarding thoughts as they arise, as they remain active, as they pass away.

4. Contemplating on the Rise and Fall

Contemplating on “the rise and fall” (udayabbaya) of the aggregates is a powerful meditative practice that leads to insight into the true nature of reality. This sustained practice leads, in due course, to the destruction of the mental influxes, that is, arhathood or full self-awakening itself.

Here, bhikkhus, for a monk dwells contemplating the arising and falling way of the five aggregates, thus: this is form, this is the arising of form, this is the passing away of form; this is feeling, this is the arising of feeling, this is the passing away of feeling; this is perception, this is the arising of perception, this is the passing away of perception; these are formations, this is the arising of formations, this is the passing away of formations; this is consciousness, this is the arising of consciousness, this is the passing away of consciousness.⁴⁰

Conclusion

In conclusion, understanding the method of cultivation of Bhāvanāmayapaññā, the following subjects have explained, such as: the etymological term of Paññā, the meaning of Paññā, the classifications of Paññā in general, and the development of Bhāvanāmayapaññā. Under the development of Bhāvanāmayapaññā, one specific discourse (sutta) called Samādhi Bhāvanā Sutta has been taken into consideration, in which the Sutta contents are very applicable for the development of Bhāvanāmayapaññā in the Theravāda Buddhist scriptures. The contents of the sutta involve the explanation of the four Jhānas, the perception of light, the perception of impermanence and the contemplation

⁴⁰ S. III. 66-68, 210; Vism 629-633; This is concentration (samādhi) connected with insight directed towards the rise and fall of the 5 aggregates, which affirms the characteristic of impermanence, on which basis the meditator discerns that whatever is impermanent is suffering, and consequently, not-self.

on rise and fall. In connection with the contemplation on rise and fall, some modern contemplative meditation systems have been included.

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