

Buddhist Wisdom and Human Transformation

Buddhist wisdom Pañña (Pali), Prajñā (Sanskrit) differs from other kinds of wisdom indicated by the terms such as "understanding", "knowledge", "insight", and "intellect". So, Ven. Buddhaghosa, the celebrated commentator on the Pali canon, defines "Pañña" in Buddhist context as follows:

"The understanding consisting in insight knowledge associated with profitable consciousness"¹

Further he explains that this particular mode of understanding is different from other modes of perceiving (sañjana) and cognizing (vijjana). Although the state of knowing is equally present in perception (sañña), consciousness (viññāna) and understanding (pañña) the pañña can alone penetrate into the real nature of things - impermanence (anicca), unsatisfactoriness (anicca) and non-self (anatta).²

According to the traditional fourfold method of definition

- i. The specific characteristic of pañña is penetrating the own-nature of states (lakkaṇa)
- ii. Its function is to destroy the darkness of ignorance which conceals the real nature of states (rasa)
- iii. Its manifestation is non-delusion (paccupphanna)
- iv. Its proximate cause is concentration (padaṇḍa)³

There are some specific subjects prescribed in the discourses as well as in Abhidhamma to penetrate through pañña which are designated as states (dhamma) related to the real nature of the world of experience. They represent almost all the basic teachings of Buddhism and the following are the most important doctrines considered as the soil in which pañña grows:

- i. Five aggregates (khandha)
- ii. Twelve bases (āyatana)
- iii. Eighteen elements (dhātu)
- iv. Faculties (indriya)
- v. Truths (sacca)
- vi. Dependent co-origination (paṭiccasamuppāda)⁴

Pañña when compared with a tree, it is rooted in the soil represented by the above doctrines. Its roots are similar to the purity of moral behavior and the purity of mind. Its trunk is compared with the purities of views, doubts, path and non-path, practice and insight knowledge.⁵

The above mentioned factors refer to the three stages of the Buddhist path - morality (purity of moral behavior), concentration (purity of mind), and wisdom (other five kinds of purity). As a result of the development of *pañña* one can attain the four paths and four fruits which lead to the realization of *Nibbāna*, the final aim of Buddhism.

A tree cannot be fully identified separated from its ground (soil), roots and trunk. They are mutually inter-dependant. Similarly the three stages of Buddhist path leading to *nibbāna* cannot be separated one from the other. Due to this reason in many discourses these three kinds of training (*tiśikkhā*) are qualified with the term *anupubba* - gradual.⁶

Our main subject *pañña* also cannot be explained separated from the other two factors namely morality (*sīla*) and concentration (*samādhi*). These three stages of the Buddhist path refer to three kinds of transformation in human personality:

- i. behavioral transformation (*sīla*)
- ii. mental (psychological) transformation (*samādhi*)
- iii. intellectual (cognitive) transformation (*paññā*)

Human personality is analyzed as five aggregates, twelve bases and eighteen elements etc. in a number of discourses. Among such analyses the most popular analysis is the teaching of the five aggregates. It also covers all other analyses related to physical and mental aspects of human personality.

- i. *rūpa* - physical body consisting of the five senses and their respective objects in the external world.
- ii. *vedanā* - feelings that arise as a result of the contact between the senses, sense-objects and the consciousness.
- iii. *saññā* - perceptions or memories of those feelings registered in the mind for later reflection and to create similar feelings.
- iv. *sākhāra* - Dispositions or concepts constructed in regard to feelings as a result of constant reflection over the memories.
- v. *viññāna* - consciousness, personality, soul or I-ness developed as a totality of the above mentioned four aggregates.⁷

Now two factors are very clear:

- i. three kinds of transformation: moral, mental and intellectual
- ii. human personality: physical body, feelings, perceptions, dispositions, consciousness

In a large number of modern works these two factors have been analyzed, explained and described individually. But I have not seen any work where these three stages of training explained in connection with the five aggregates of human personality. My considered opinion regarding this point is given below in brief:

Ven. Buddhagosa gives five similes in order to clarify the real nature of five aggregates of clinging (pa~cup@d@nakkhandha).

r#pa - matter (physical body): sick-room (hospital)

vedan@ - feelings: sickness

sa~~@ - perceptions: arising of the sickness

sa<kh@ra - dispositions: taking unsuitable foods, etc. to increase the sickness

vi~~@%a - consciousness: sick man⁸

The sick man (consciousness) dwells in the hospital (body), he has a sickness (feelings, enjoyment), the sickness arises (as a result of seeking after the feelings again and again keeping them as memories or perceptions) the sickness increases as a result of reflection over the memories and creating wrong concepts (dispositions, formations) over them and taking them as essential for life, all these are done by the sick man which is the consciousness, the collective concept of I-ness.

The three kinds of transformation mentioned above can be applied to the five aggregates as follows:

r#pa - behavioral transformation by moral training (s\$la)

vedan@ } mental transformation by
sa~~@ } concentration (sam@dhi)

sa<kh@ra } intellectual or cognitive transformation
vi~~@%a } by wisdom (pa~~a)

Physical behavior of man directly affects the mental behavior. So, physical behavior namely bodily functions and verbal actions should be restrained by observing moral rules in order to prepare a good ground for mental training. According to the methods of samatha meditation in the first trance five mental qualities are produced. Human mind has two main aspects - emotional and intellectual. Among the five jh@nic factors the first two initial application (vitakka) and investigation (vic@ra) refer to the intellectual aspect and zest (p\$ti) and happiness (sukha) refer to emotional aspect. Almost all the meditational subjects related to jh@na of samatha are closely connected with the aggregates of feeling and perception. So, concentration is mainly applied to train and calm down the aggregates of feeling and perception.

Dispositions (concepts) and consciousness (I-ness) are developed through the intellectual process and they should be eliminated by wisdom or insight meditation, through understanding the impermanent, unsatisfactory and essenceless nature of such concepts.

In brief, we can understand that Buddhism explains a path leading to a transformation of human personality by means of wisdom (pa~~a) based on morality and concentration. The saints who have attained this transformation are like the lotus flowers grown in a muddy place. They live in the world but not attached to it. They are fully emancipated and they will never be reborn again. They show the path leading to the cessation of suffering (nirodha) which is the only way for obtaining an eternal happiness. The liberated beings are human beings but they are extraordinary human beings (acchariyamanuss@) because they have fully transformed their personality in regard to five aggregates. Ordinary beings possess five grasping groups (pa~cup@d@nakkhandha) but liberated saints (arhants) possess only five aggregates without clinging (up@d@na). Such beings are the torch-bearers of mankind (ukk@dh@ra) because of whom people can develop wisdom (pa~~@) in order to dispel the darkness of ignorance, the foundation of all problems in human life.

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End Notes

¹ The Path of Purification (Visuddhimagga) tr. Bhikkhu Ñāṃoli, Taiwan, 1956, p. 479

² op. cit. , p. 480

³ op. cit. , p. 481

⁴ op. cit. , p. 592

⁵ op. cit. , p. 488

⁶ G. D. Sumanapala, An Introduction to Theravāda Abhidhamma, Singapore, 1998, pp. 153-155

⁷ G. D. Sumanapala, Abhidhammic Interpretation of Early Buddhist Teachings, Singapore, 2005, pp. 8-23;
Sumanapala Galmangoda, Reality and Expression, Sri Lanka, 2008, pp. 44-45

⁸ The Path of Purification, op. cit. , p. 544