

The Concepts of Jñāna and Prajñā

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The study of *jñāna* and *prajñā* as philosophical terms is an intricate and intriguing problem. Almost all scholars use these terms in the same meaning as intuition or insight, etc. According to their views, *prajñā* and *jñāna* are mysterious faculties, just as intuition is a philosophical method. They do not account for nor recognise the difference between both concepts. Behind the confusion among their views, there is a misunderstanding of the historical development of these concepts.

It appears, therefore, that the key to understanding the true meaning of intuition (an indigenous Indian method) is to define these concepts in their historically different periods and theoretically varied meanings.

Now, in the history of Buddhist thought we must draw attention toward the three different periods: early Buddhism, Abhidhamma Philosophy, and early Mahāyāna Philosophy. In order to accept intuition as an Indian philosophical method, the aspects of philosophical development in India should be taken into consideration.

I. *The Period of Early (Nikāya) Buddhism (ca. 431-271 B. C.)*

Paññā is not simply an exercise of thought on matters of general knowledge and practice, nor is it a dialectic or desultory reverie. *Paññā*, as Mrs. Rhys Davids pointed out, is not a mere intellectual "convolution" of thought. It means thus, "coming-to-know" and "coming-to-be." *Ñāna* means just knowledge "in either a next to hand, or a lofty sense." But her classification does not necessarily apply to all of the Nikāya Buddhism, since it is based more upon the Abhidhamma School standpoint than upon the Nikāya view. This is because in the Nikāya Buddhism no such distinctive differentiation has appeared.

II. *The Period of the Abhidhamma Philosophy (ca. 271 B. C.—1 A. D.)*

In this Abhidhamma period we may find a multi-polar distinction

between *jñāna* and *prajñā*. Here I would like to confine my discussion of the schools to only two as follows.

1. *The Theravāda School*

Through an analysis of the seven main original Pāli treatises, the distinctive essentials of the differences between *jñāna* and *prajñā* may be summarised thus:

(a) Although the distinction between *jñāna* and *prajñā* had been merely implied in the period of the Nikāya Buddhism, nevertheless, it became exemplified in the Abhidhamma treatises and, furthermore, it became interpreted from the practical viewpoint.

(b) The essence of *jñāna* is “to have been known” (*ñāta*) and that of *prajñā* is “to be knowing in detail” (*prajānana*), which has been considered an essential distinction between both, ever since its description in the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* treatise.

In other words, *jñāna* can be characterised by “to have been known” (*jñāta*), “locality” (*padesa*) and “object” (to be attained by practising). *Prajñā* can be characterised by “to be knowing in detail” (*prajānana*), “function” (*icca*) and “characterising of one’s own self.”

(c) In so far as *prajñā* refers to some sort of function, it is subject to the subjective side rather than to the objective, which is a characteristic feature of *jñāna* in its nature. So far as *prajñā* refers to “characterising of one’s own self,” it would be the same as making known one’s own character to others.

In order to prove this statement, we may consider the *Puggala-paññatti*. This treatise refers to the classification of various types of persons. And then, precisely considered, the criterion of such classification lies in the essential character of *paññā*: “to make known one’s own character to others,” but not merely in the enumeration of the varieties of persons. This nature of *prajñā* is also shown by the fact that, etymologically speaking, the title “*Puggalapaññatti*” is in itself derived from *Puggala*+*paññatti*, and “*paññatti*” from “to make known” (*paññāpana*). Therefore, the

Puggalapaññatti treatise means by itself the treatise in which persons are variegated and classified in compliance with their own character of making themselves known to others. Hence, the criterion of classification in this treatise is nothing but *pañña* itself, designated above as “characterising one’s own self.”

2. *The Sarvastivāda School*

(a) In this school, *prajñā* is classified under two divisions: the mental factor (*cetasika*) on the one hand, and *jñāna* on the other. Why, then, is *prajñā* subject to the mental factors? And why, also, is *prajñā* included in the *jñāna nirdeśa* (*jñāna* chapter), which is to be distinguished from *prajñā* by itself?

The reason is because *prajñā* in itself is to be interpreted from two aspects, namely, from the mental function on the one hand, and from the practical side with respect to *jñāna* on the other.

(b) As mentioned above, *prajñā* involves in itself both sides: the theoretical side with respect to the mental factors and the practical side with respect to *jñāna*, for which *prajñā* endeavours to attain.

III. *The Period of Early Mahāyāna Buddhism* (ca. 100 A. D.)

The Nikāya Buddhist tenet “*Paññā* is to be practised” has been developed through the Abhidhamma schools and maintained to meet specific doctrinal modifications of its own. Subsequently, such a traditional heritage has become one of the historical bases of Mahāyāna Buddhism, in which the concept of *prajñā* especially has been developed. Thus, the *Prajñāpāramitā* philosophy is contingent upon the practical meaning of *prajñā* itself, which has been preserved through the Abhidhamma Philosophy since the period of early Buddhism.

This fact can be verified not only by the title “*Prajñāpāramitā*” itself, but also by the philosophy in the *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra* and its commentaries, among which the *Abhisamayālaṅkar’ālokā-vyākhyā* and *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* I have referred to in my article.