

Paññā - Wisdom and Intuitive Intelligence

Bhante Bodhidhamma · DhammaBytes · 10:47

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhassa Namō tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhassa Namō tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhassa

Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-enlightened one.

I want to look at this word *paññā*, which often comes up alongside, in some form or other, the word *sati*, which means awareness, but I'll deal with that another time.

So this word *paññā*, it has two parts to it. The *ñā* comes right through the Greek with gnosis and the Latin and ends up with us as "no." It's the same root word which is a sentimental link with the Buddha. And the *pa* is just a reinforcing of a really, a really "no."

We tend to translate it as insight, but in its passive form we refer to it as wisdom. And wisdom here isn't to be confused with knowledge in the sense of cleverness. It's the way we relate to life either wisely or unwisely. It's a position. And this wisdom, when it's active, becomes an insightful process.

Sometimes it's translated as a knowing, which is a lovely word for it because knowing tells you what it does and it doesn't concretise it into an object.

When we are meditating, what we're trying to pull out or make obvious to ourselves is this faculty of *paññā*, this pure intelligence, this intuitive intelligence that we have. The reason why we get confused is because it's always expressing itself through something phenomenal, something that is within the world.

So physical intelligence, you see that in sports people. A tennis player might practice a great deal, but on the court there's no thought. There's just that immediate response. It's a sort of physical wisdom, you can say. Even just ordinary people - if something comes flying at you, you don't think about it, you just move. So that's an intelligence expressing itself through our physical nature.

The other main one would be an aesthetic intelligence through art, and we can see that in people especially who perform. They're not thinking, they just do. They've practiced the piece, and then it's just that complete absorption in the expression, whatever they're doing - singing, playing piano, whatever.

And in the intellect, of course, that's the final one. This intelligence has to express itself, its knowledge, through words as well, through concepts.

Through this process of *vipassanā*, specifically this process of *vipassanā*, we're trying to disembed this intelligence from its confusion with the body, heart and mind. And that's what we're doing when we make

these things an object. So when we see feelings and sensations, when we're moving around and we're aware of the body moving, when we are aware of our emotional states, and when we're aware of our images and thoughts, we're aware of something. So the awareness there, even in the language, tells us that the awareness is something separate from what it's aware of.

It's making everything very clearly an object to ourselves so that this intelligence begins to recognise its own specific quality. And it cannot know itself in the same way that it can know an object. So in the Mahāyāna they'll say, the eye cannot see itself. The tongue doesn't taste itself. It's totally something which is beyond the phenomenal world. Can you imagine if your tongue had its root taste, had a regular root taste? The actual taste of the tongue was curry - it'd ruin the porridge, wouldn't it?

So it's a case of recognising that our senses are totally receptive. They don't actually come coloured, you might say. They come with an ability. So for instance, sight comes with an ability to see, but a person may be colour-blind, but it's still a receptive faculty.

So this intelligence, this primordial intelligence that we have, isn't something which can eventually be described, and yet it knows. This is the peculiar thing. And it doesn't know what it knows until it expresses what it knows. So that's why an artist, something like a painter, keeps working with the piece. And in so doing, this intelligence finds a way of expressing what it knows.

When we're describing something, even now as I'm talking, some of it I might know in the sense of something I've already learnt from the past, but often I find even when I'm talking, I say something in a slightly different way or I say something differently, which has not been thought out. It just comes. And I'm sure you've all had the experience of saying something amazingly wise and wondering where it came from. So it's that intelligence within us.

The last thing to really understand is that this intelligence sparks any time. The *vipassanā*, the practice of *vipassanā* is just a training. It's just helping us to discover this original intelligence. But it sparks off at any time. It's well known, for instance, in the Mahāsi tradition that often insights, deep insights come exactly when you don't expect them, like when you're eating and stuff like that, because often our *vipassanā* is distorted by wrong effort - trying to see something, trying to understand something.

So this intelligence we have is the active side of our awareness, which is often translated as consciousness, awareness, attention - all that. All these words in English are all pointing to this faculty, this *satipaññā*, this awareness intelligence. And the awareness is more that receptive nature, the receiving. When it becomes active, it becomes a sort of passive action of wisdom, seeing things in a particular way. And then when an occasion arises, you get this insight, this darting forth, this grasp of something.

And it's not limited to the spiritual life. We're talking here about the spiritual life where that darting forth is really to do with understanding these three characteristics, because the purpose of our practice is simply to bring an end to suffering. But it's there in everything we do - this intelligence. Whether it's

opening the bonnet of your car and looking to see what's wrong, or whether it's something you're struggling with and you sleep on it and then you wake up next morning and you've got an idea, whether it's a personal problem or a problem in life. Often these answers come really by just, as they say, sleeping on the problem - just allowing this intelligence, giving it time to work out, work itself out.

And that frankly is a mystery, at least it's a mystery to me, how it does that. And that's another little insight into this idea of not me, not mine, not in control. We're not in control, not even in control of this wonderful intelligence we have. It has its own way of working things out.

And so finally, the Buddha himself, having gone through his own training and coming to that point of liberation, which is the liberation of this intelligence, then he begins to teach. And all those things - his body, his aesthetic sense, because he likes to use imagery and stuff, and his intellect - are put to the service of expressing his understandings.

So that in summary is this word *paññā*, which is this fundamental basic Buddha nature we have, this intuitive intelligence.

So I can only hope my words have been of some use. May you be liberated sooner rather than later.

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