

# 04. Paññā: Intuitive Intelligence and Wisdom

Bhante Bodhidhamma · DhammaBytes · 9:59

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*Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammāsambuddhassa. Namō Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammāsambuddhassa. Namō Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammāsambuddhassa.* Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-enlightened one.

So the next perfection—it began, remember, with *dāna*, giving, morality, *sīla*, and then renunciation, *nekkamma*. Wisdom, *paññā*, is the next one.

So now, *paññā*, spelled P-A-N-N with that Spanish symbol on top. I forget the name of it. Does anybody know it? Spanish symbol. And the A. And this *paññā*, it's got that root sound, ñ, which comes right through the Greek, gn, and comes to us as knowledge. And the *pā* is giving it a real power. So there's two words: *vijñāna* it comes to the same word which means to discern or discriminate, and *paññā* means to really see deeply. So we translate that as insight.

Now it has both the active form as an insightful moment, but it also has a passive form as wisdom, your collected wisdom. And remember, wisdom is not to be confused with knowledge. Wisdom is to do with how we relate to the world. It's a much bigger word than just knowledge.

And the Buddha talks about three stages. The first one is *sutamaya paññā*, which is the understanding or the insights you get from listening to somebody, as you are now. And if you think about it, that's how you enter into anything, whether it's a secular subject like science or history, and it's a spiritual path. First of all, you listen. You receive something. So it's the wisdom you get from receiving something. And this can be just an intellectual understanding—oh yes, it's very interesting—but it can also strike quite deeply.

And there are occasions in the scripture where people just on hearing a scripture seem to have had a quite deep insight just on the hearing of it. So listening to something can be quite life-changing. Maybe there is something that you have experienced. In my own life, I would say the experience of actually not so much reading, but seeing *Waiting for Godot*. I can always consider that the beginning of my spiritual path. It had such a profound effect on me. And I couldn't stop talking about it for days, to the annoyance of everybody who knew me. And that wasn't as though I thought about it or anything. I was just receiving the basic message that that play had to give. Just hitting it at the right time in the right place.

The next one is *cintāmayā paññā*. *Cinta* is just the word for the mind. So that's basically when we receive something, we begin to mull it over in our minds. And in so doing, as it were, it becomes our own knowledge. So that's why you get what we call inspirational reading. In inspirational reading, and this is something that the Benedictines in the Christian tradition developed, it's called *Lectio Divina*, divine

reading. You read something—that's your receiving. And then, as it were, when something strikes you, a bit like music, a bit like a poem, you keep repeating it. You keep just reading it over and over until you get this sense of absorbing it, a digestion. And at that point, maybe not immediately afterwards, but at some time you find yourself thinking about it. And this thinking about it actually makes it your own knowledge.

Now, if you can't think about it, it never actually gets to be your own knowledge, and you normally can't explain it. I have a very good personal example of that. I've read relativity theory in very simple layman's terms many a time, but I still can't explain it to somebody. I seem to lose the thread of the logic of it at some point. But I understand it when I read it. This is the funny thing. But when I try and think about it, I tend to lose it.

And then finally, of course, there's this *vipassanā* *paññā*. So seeing things at that direct grasp of things. And that, of course, is really beginning to employ a faculty within us which is not thought.

So this faculty within us, *paññā*, this intuitive wisdom, this intuitive intelligence—intuitive awareness is sometimes called—but if we just separate it from awareness, which is more the receiving part, the actual bit that's intelligent, the intuitive intelligence, normally speaking, does not distinguish itself from thought. And the whole process of *vipassanā* is to begin to separate that intelligence from thought. And that in the Mahāsī tradition is done by noting. So the thought is contained in a word, but as it were, the intelligence is pointing at something else: the direct feeling of a thing or the direct characteristic of a thing such as its arising and passing nature.

And in so doing, in freeing itself from thought, it now has a direct grasp of the way things really are. And the paradox is that it couldn't have got to that point without going through that process of receiving knowledge and thinking about it. And it's through that very medium of thought that once it's had an insight, it can then tell itself what it's just seen. Otherwise, it wouldn't be able to reflect upon the insights that it has.

And I think the greatest example of that in scientific history, or the most common one, or the most famous one, is Archimedes. So Archimedes is trying to figure out whether this crown is real gold or not, and he needs the weight and the volume, and he divides one into the other, or he gets confused, and eventually comes up with a specific weight, and then he knows it's pure gold. When it comes to weight of an irregular object, there's no problem. He just puts it on weights and he knows how many grams it is. But how do you get the volume of an irregular shape? Now, to us, of course, it seems very obvious. But in those days, somebody's got to crack that. Somebody's got to actually break through that conundrum. How do you get the volume of an irregular shape?

So he's thinking about it and he's probably racking his brains about it. The king would probably chop his head off. And finally, he gives up and he takes a bath. And as he's relaxing—I can only presume he's relaxing, not thinking about it—getting into a bath, and as he gets into the bath, he suddenly sees that the water is rising, and it must be rising by the displacement caused through his own body. And there he is,

he's got it, and he shouts, "Eureka! I've got it, I've found it." If he'd never have had a bath at that moment, we probably would still not know how to get the volume of an irregular shape.

So that ability that we have within us, this intuitive intelligence, is what *vipassanā* meditation is specifically trying to develop. And that's how we get these insights. And the insight, remember, into impermanence, into the psychology of suffering, and into this quality of not-me-not-mine is liberational. That's what actually liberates us from a delusive idea of what the world is. And it's that liberation which brings us to perfect peace and happiness.

So this *paññā*, of course, is absolutely central to the Buddha's teaching and how to develop it and where to look in order to liberate ourselves. And therefore that also is a perfection that also has to be brought to a point of keen exercise.

I can only hope my words have been of some assistance. May you develop your *paññā* and be liberated from all suffering sooner rather than later.

*Sādhu, sādhu, sādhu.*

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