

Prajñā in the Ancient Nikāyas

I. The Nikāyas/Āgamas as the Oldest Buddhist Source Material

II. The Unique Role of Prajñā in Buddhism

1. Prajñā as the key element in the Buddha's enlightenment.
2. Prajñā completes the training of the disciples: *sīla*, *saṃādhi*, and *prajñā*.

II. Word Explanation

1. Prajñā (Skt)/ *paññā* (Pali): comes from root *jñā/ñā* = to know, preceded by prefix *pra/pa*, which gives the word a dynamic or active sense. So *paññā* /*prajñā* = the act of knowing, the act of understanding, as distinguished from *ñāna/jñāna* = knowledge as an attribute, possession. But in actual usage, the two are not clearly distinguishable.

2. Corresponding verb is '*pajñāti/ prajñāti*' = to understand, to discern, to know. But *prajñā* is not ordinary understanding. It is the understanding that arises through spiritual training. It arises on the basis of concentration, illuminates the true nature of things, "things as they really are," and culminates in the mind's purification and liberation.

III. Paññā/prajñā in the Buddha's enlightenment

1. "This is the noble truth of suffering' ... 'This is the noble truth of the origin of suffering' ... 'This is the noble truth of the cessation of suffering' ... 'This is the noble truth of the way leading to the cessation of suffering': thus, monks, in regard to things unheard before, there arose in me vision, knowledge, *wisdom*, true knowledge, and light."

2. "Then, monks, it occurred to me: 'When what exists does aging-and-death come to be? By what is aging-and-death conditioned?' Then, monks, *through careful attention*, there took place in me *a breakthrough by wisdom (yoniso manasikāraṃ ahu paññāya abhisamāyo)*: 'When there is birth, aging-and-death comes to be; aging-and-death has birth as its condition.' ... "Thus with ignorance as condition, volitional formations [come to be]; with volitional formations as condition, consciousness.... Such is the origin of this whole mass of suffering.

"'Origination, origination'—thus, monks, in regard to things unheard before there arose in me vision, knowledge, *wisdom*, true knowledge, and light.

3. "Then, monks, it occurred to me: 'When what does not exist does aging-and-death not come to be? With the cessation of what does the cessation of aging-and-death come about?' Then, monks, *through careful attention*, there took place in me *a breakthrough by wisdom*: 'When there is no birth, aging-and-death does not come to be; with the cessation of birth comes cessation of aging-and-death.' ... 'When there is no ignorance, volitional formations do not come to be; with the cessation of ignorance comes cessation of volitional formations.'

"'Cessation, cessation'—thus, monks, in regard to things unheard before there arose in me vision, knowledge, *wisdom*, true knowledge, and light."

IV. Two general observations about based on the Nikāyas

1. *Paññā* is conditioned: it does not arise spontaneously, but it is produced by causes and conditions; most notably virtue and concentration. Sometimes careful attention is the condition. Sometimes learning, inquiry, and reflection. (Three stages of *paññā*: born of learning, reflection, and meditation.)

2. Paññā is directed towards our experience; it is the act of understanding the true nature of experience. What does this involve? Two things:

3. (1) A grasp of the composite nature of experience: distinctive mark of Buddha's teaching is the analysis of experience into constituents ("dhammas"). Schemes prominent in the Nikayas: the five aggregates; the twelve sense bases; the six or eighteen elements. (2) Discernment of certain basic patterns fundamental to experience: one uses these patterns as templates for close contemplation and investigation of experience.

IV. Four fundamental patterns to be discerned by means of paññā

1. The "Gratification, Danger, & Escape" Pattern (*assada, dāna, nissaraṇa*)

"So long, monks, as I did not directly know as they really are the gratification, the danger, and the escape in the case of the world (or: the four elements; or the five aggregates; or the six inner & outer sense bases), I did not claim to have awakened to the unsurpassed perfect enlightenment in this world with its gods. But when I directly knew all this as it really is, then I claimed to have awakened to the unsurpassed perfect enlightenment in this world." (AN 3:101a; SN 14:31; SN 22:26; SN 35:15)

What are they? "The pleasure and joy that arise in dependence on the world: this is the gratification in the world. That the world is impermanent, suffering, and subject to change: this is the danger in the world. The removal and abandonment of desire and lust for the world: this is the escape from the world." (ibid)

"I have clearly seen with wisdom just how far the gratification in the world extends. I have clearly seen with wisdom just how far the danger in the world extends. I have clearly seen with wisdom just how far the escape from the world extends." (AN 3:101b; see too SN 22:27, etc.)

2. The "Conditional Arising and Cessation" Pattern

"So long as I did not directly know as they really are the five aggregates subject to clinging in four phases,⁸⁰ I did not claim to have awakened to the unsurpassed perfect enlightenment in this world with its gods. But when I directly knew all this as it really is, then I claimed to have awakened to the unsurpassed perfect enlightenment in this.

"And what are the four phases? I directly knew form, its origin, its cessation, and the way leading to its cessation. I directly knew feeling ... perception ... volitional formations ... consciousness, its origin, its cessation, and the way leading to its cessation." (SN 22:56; see MN 9; SN 12:27,28, etc.; SN 14:39)

3. "Three Characteristics of Existence" Pattern (*anicca-dukkha-anattā*)

"Monks, form (... consciousness) is impermanent. What is impermanent is suffering. What is suffering is nonself. What is nonself should be seen as it really is with correct wisdom thus: 'This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.'" (SN 22:15)

4. "Three Aspects of Non-Self" Pattern (*n'etaṃ mama, n'eso 'ham asmi, n'eso me attā*)

(1) "Now both the internal earth element and the external earth element are simply earth element. And that should be seen as it actually is with proper wisdom thus: 'This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.'" (MN 28)

(2) "Therefore, monks, any kind of form (...consciousness) whatsoever, whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near, all form (... consciousness) should be seen as it really is with correct wisdom thus: 'This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.'" (SN 22:59)

V. Paññā brings liberation: correct wisdom > disenchantment > dispassion > liberation.