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**Donald K. Swearer Two types of saving
knowledge in the Pāli suttas**

Several studies have recently appeared which have dealt in whole or in part with the epistemology of Buddhism. They range from Jayatilleke's technical, philosophical-analytical argument that early Buddhism was rooted in a broadly based empiricism offering a middle way between nihilism and realism to Jacobson's more popularized efforts to use "modern concepts to elucidate old thoughts."¹ In between these parameters are a number of more or less specialized studies from varying perspectives within Buddhism by Robinson, Wayman, Guenther, and others.²

While such problems as the means of knowledge, the nature of Buddhist logic, the role of analysis, theories of meaning and truth, and the problem of the limits of knowledge all emerge from these discussions, the issue of what Herbert V. Guenther calls "levels of understanding" holds a particular interest.³ Guenther's own exposition of the problem is based primarily on Tibetan Buddhist yoga texts. From that perspective he generalizes about Buddhism as a way to enlightenment or knowledge of reality. He contends that the Buddhist path involves a fundamental change of attitude from a "discursive cognitive situation" to an "intuitive cognitive situation."⁴ This distinction is another way of describing the differentiation between levels of understanding made in both Sanskrit and Pāli texts between assumed or indirect meaning (*neyārtha/neyyattha*) and real or direct meaning (*nītārtha/nītattha*).

Whereas there is a definite delineation between levels of understanding or modes of knowing in Buddhism—whether they be two or three—they are not made essentially distinct. That is, as Guenther puts it, the relatively real and ultimately real are indivisible.⁵ This highest level of knowledge is mystical—not in the sense of absorption but in that it is immediate and nonpropositional. In fact, states Guenther, it "... is fundamentally empirical and realistic, taking into account the ineffability of the immediately given."⁶

Although he writes from the base of Pāli or Theravāda Buddhism rather

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¹ K. N. Jayatilleke, *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1963); Nolan Pliny Jacobson, *Buddhism the Religion of Analysis* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1966).

² Cf. Guenther, "Mentalism and Beyond in Buddhist Philosophy," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 86, no. 3 (Jul.-Sept., 1966): 297-305; Richard H. Robinson, "Mysticism and Logic in Seng-chao's Thought," *Philosophy East and West* 8, nos. 3 and 4 (1958-1959): 99-120; D. T. Suzuki, "Reason (*viññāna*) and Intuition (*prajñā*) in Buddhist Philosophy," in *Essays in East-West Philosophy*, ed. C. A. Moore (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1951), pp. 17-48; Alex Wayman, "Notes on the Sanskrit Term, *jñāna*," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 75, no. 4 (Oct.-Dec., 1955): 253-268.

³ "The Levels of Understanding in Buddhism," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 78, no. 1 (Jan.-Mar., 1958): 19-28.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

than the Mahāyāna perspective of Tibetan *yoga*, K. N. Jayatilleke's observations about the particular issue of levels of understanding in Buddhist epistemology are not as unlike those of Guenther as one might suppose. While he sees the epistemology of early Buddhism as fundamentally empirical rather than intuitive, he stretches the term empirical to include transempirical states (that is, *nirvāṇa*) and extrasensory data. Empirical knowledge, then, in Jayatilleke's usage is very similar to Guenther's claim that saving knowledge in Buddhism is "knowledge by acquaintance" and not "knowledge by description."⁷ Furthermore, just as Guenther contends that levels of understanding are distinct but that finally or ultimately there is only one truth, so Jayatilleke argues that in the Pāli texts the two differing levels of understanding—direct (*nītattha*) and indirect (*neyyattha*)—lead to one truth. This truth or state of being cannot be described or understood rationally, but it can be realized and attained.⁸ Thus, like Guenther, Jayatilleke is claiming that although there are distinct levels of understanding or modes of knowing they are ultimately resolved in a nonpropositional truth which can be realized "intuitively" but not known discursively.

A more general consideration of this issue, but one which is germane to a proposal I will make below, is offered by D.T. Suzuki. Suzuki juxtaposes discursive and intuitive levels of understanding in the terms of *viññāna*/*viññāṇa* and *prajñā*/*paññā*. He claims that the two are always contrasted in Buddhist thought: that *viññāna* is the mode of knowledge appropriate to the world of the senses and the intellect characterized by the duality between the seer and the seen, and that *prajñā* is the fundamental noetic principle whereby the synthetic apprehension of the whole becomes possible.⁹ As methods of knowing Suzuki finds *viññāna* and *prajñā* standing diametrically opposed. *Viññāna* is the principle of analysis and conceptualization whereas *prajñā* always aims at synthesis and unity. Yet, despite their differing functions, Suzuki believes the two complement each other and that *viññāna* cannot function without being based in *prajñā*. P.T. Raju states Suzuki's point in the following manner, "thought [*viññāna*] cannot work without intuitions [*prajñā*] and intuitions cannot be understood without thought, and . . . the distinctions between thought and intuition cannot be clear-cut."¹⁰

Building on some of the suggestions from the studies cited above, I propose to investigate the problem of the relationship that may obtain between levels of understanding or modes of knowing in selected Pāli *suttas* using *viññāṇa* and *paññā* as the two fundamental types suggested by Guenther and Jaya-

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁸ Jayatilleke, *op. cit.*, p. 476.

⁹ Suzuki, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

¹⁰ "Intuition as a Philosophical Method in India," *Philosophy East and West* 2, no. 3 (Oct., 1952): 205.

tilleke. At the outset it is important to keep in mind that I am not using them as mutually exclusive terms, but as broad categories or types of knowledge which are—as suggested by both Guenther and Jayatilleke—distinct but related to each other within the experiential matrix of the soteriological quest. As *viññāṇa* and *paññā* are being considered primarily as types of knowledge it should not surprise the student of the Pāli *suttas* that this study does not elaborate on the numerous passages where the distinction between the two words or the meaning of one or the other is ambiguous. Indeed, in both classical and Buddhist Sanskrit as well as in the Pāli literature, passages can be found where the usage of one appears to be interchangeable with the usage of the other. As I have suggested, however, my intent is not to offer a historical exegesis of *viññāṇa* and *paññā*, but an interpretation of the problem of levels of knowledge in Theravāda Buddhism focusing on these terms as types.¹¹ In doing so we shall address ourselves to three basic questions: what meaning(s) do the terms hold as distinct but related forms of consciousness and modes of knowledge; what is the nature of the relationship between the two; and, finally, do they presuppose each other as integral parts of the Buddhist salvation quest? These questions are basic to a consideration of the soteriological nature and function of knowledge in the Pāli *suttas* of Theravāda Buddhism.

DISCRIMINATING KNOWLEDGE: VIÑÑĀṆA

In studying the category of discriminating or analytical knowledge several terms will be discussed but none is more significant than *viññāṇa*. The Pāli word like the Sanskrit one etymologically means to 'distinguish, discern, observe, investigate or know'. As has been demonstrated by Franklin Edgerton, there is no clear definition of the meaning of *viññāṇa* in the writings of classical Sanskrit. In the Upaniṣads for example, *viññāṇa* sometimes appears as the form of knowledge necessary for the realization of ultimate reality (cf. *Kaṭha* IV.15, *Chāndogya* VIII.7.1), but it also appears in more mundane contexts such as the knowledge of snake charming (cf. *Chāndogya* VII.5.1).

In the Pāli canon, *viññāṇa* is found to have several, differing meanings. It stands for "a mental quality as a constituent of individuality, the bearer of (individual) life, life force . . . , general consciousness . . . (and) . . . may be characterized as the sensory and perceptive activity commonly expressed by 'mind' ".¹² O. H. de A. Wijesekera summarizes four basic ways

¹¹ Cf. the exceptionally helpful article by O. H. de A. Wijesekera, "The Concept of Viññāṇa in Theravāda Buddhism," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 84, no. 3 (Jul.-Sept., 1964): 254-259.

¹² *The Pāli Text Society's Pāli-English Dictionary*, ed. T. W. Rhys Davids and William Stede (London: Luzac & Co., 1959), p. 618 (hereafter cited as *Pāli-English Dictionary*).

in which *viññāṇa* is used in the Pāli canon: (a) cognitive or perceptive consciousness; (b) the surviving factor in the individual as denoted in particular by the term, *saṃvattanika viññāṇa* (the *viññāṇa* that evolved); (c) the medium in which jhānic or spiritual progress takes place as implied by the expression *viññāṇaṭṭhiti* (the stations of *viññāṇa*); and (d) the basis of all consciousness and unconscious psychological manifestations pertaining to individuals within saṃsāric or empirical existence.¹³ Each of these usages clearly applies to the life of the individual within the phenomenal world; nevertheless, as the basis of cognition and perceptive consciousness and as part of the means by which spiritual progress is gained, *viññāṇa* becomes an important mode of knowledge relating to the Theravādin's quest for salvation.

For the purposes of this study we shall focus on two fundamental uses of *viññāṇa* in the Pāli Nikāyas: *viññāṇa* as consciousness or mind, and *viññāṇa* as a mode of knowing. The fact that *viññāṇa* is found to represent both a condition of consciousness as well as a type of knowledge will prove to be of the utmost significance.

Viññāṇa as consciousness or mind is nearly synonymous with two other important terms in the Pāli canon, *citta*, and *mano*. *Citta* refers to the center of man's emotional and intellectual nature. The Pāli Text Society's dictionary states that such English expressions as "heart and soul" best capture the meaning of *citta* and that it refers especially to the conative and emotional side of thought.¹⁴ As Mrs. Rhys Davids writes, "In *citta* we . . . usually have man as affective and affected, as experiencing."¹⁵ *Mano*, on the other hand, is said to represent the intellectual function of consciousness, especially as it is expressed in valuing, measuring, purposing, and intending.¹⁶ *Viññāṇa* complements *citta* and *mano* by referring to perceptive and sensory activity.¹⁷ Despite these distinctions, however, in *Samyutta Nikāya* (II. 95), *viññāṇa*, *citta*, and *mano* are equated and stand in opposition to *kāya* or body.¹⁸ Let us assume then, without further elaboration, that in the Pāli *suttas* the terms *citta*, *mano*, and *viññāṇa* were used either synonymously or as essentially related aspects of the same empirical consciousness.

Two important characteristics of the empirical consciousness in early Buddhism demand our attention. The first is its impermanent nature, and the second may be characterized as the surviving factor in the individual within

¹³ Wijesekera, *op. cit.*, p. 295.

¹⁴ *Pali-English Dictionary*, p. 266.

¹⁵ C. A. F. Rhys Davids, *The Birth of Indian Psychology and Its Development in Buddhism* (London: Luzac & Co., 1935), p. 237 (hereafter cited as C. A. F. Rhys Davids, *The Birth of Indian Psychology*).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Pali-English Dictionary*, p. 618. Cf. also C. A. F. Rhys Davids, *The Birth of Indian Psychology*, p. 245ff.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

samsāric or empirical existence. The impermanent nature of consciousness may be illustrated by this famous passage from the *Samyutta Nikāya*: “But this, brethren, that we call thought, that we call mind, that we call consciousness, that arises as one thing, ceases as another, whether by night or by day. Just as a monkey, brethren, faring through the woods, through the great forest catches hold of a bough, letting it go seizes another, even so that which we call thought, mind, consciousness, that arises as one thing, ceases as another, both by night and by day.”¹⁹

Elsewhere in the *suttas* it is made abundantly clear that the impermanence of the empirical consciousness is a result of its connection with the senses. That is, empirical consciousness appears to be dependent upon conditions created by the attachment of the senses to sense objects. As *Majjhima Nikāya* I.259 puts it, “apart from condition there is no origination of consciousness.”²⁰ The same *sutta* goes on to say that visual consciousness arises because of eye and material shapes; auditory consciousness arises because of ear and sounds; olfactory consciousness arises because of nose and smells; gustatory consciousness arises because of tongue and tastes; tactile consciousness arises because of body and touches; mental consciousness arises because of mind and mental objects.²¹ The consequences of the fact that *viññāṇa* arises through contact between the sense organs and sense objects are significant. It raises the question of whether cognitive consciousness originates *de novo* from an empirical situation or simply begins to function when contact is made between the organ and the object of sense. Wijesekera supports the latter interpretation, insisting that the former would equate Buddhism with materialism in its theory of perception.²² For our purposes, the most significant point stems from the fact that *viññāṇa* functions only in relationship to objects of sense, hence, creating the possibility—if not the necessity—of consciousness being tied to the mundane or phenomenal world.

The dimension of this potential attachment to mundane objects is illustrated by the following passage from the *Madhupīṇḍika Sutta* of the *Majjhima Nikāya*:

Visual consciousness, your reverences, arises because of eye and material shapes; the meeting of the three is sensory impingement (*phassa*); feelings (*vedanā*) are because of sensory impingement; what one feels one perceives (*sañjānāti*); what one perceives one reasons about (*vitakketi*); what one

¹⁹ *The Book of Kindred Sayings (Samyutta Nikāya)* 5 vols., trans. C. A. F. Rhys Davids and F. L. Woodward (London: Oxford University Press, 1917–1930), 2:66 (hereafter cited as *The Book of Kindred Sayings*).

²⁰ *The Middle Length Sayings (Majjhima Nikāya)* 3 vols., trans. I. B. Horner (London: Luzac & Co., 1954–1959), 1:314 (hereafter cited as *The Middle Length Sayings*).

²¹ *The Majjhima Nikāya* 3 vols., ed. V. Trenckner, R. Chalmers, and C. A. F. Rhys Davids (London: Luzac & Co., 1888–1899), 1:295 (hereafter cited as *Majjhima Nikāya*).

²² Wijesekera, *op. cit.*, p. 255.

reasons about obsesses (*paṇāceti*) one; what obsesses one is the origin of the number of perceptions and obsessions which assail a man in regard to material shapes cognizable by the eye, past, future, present.²³

Here we find a direct connection between *viññāṇa* and *paṇāca*, or consciousness and obsession, illusion, obstacle, impediment resulting from the perceptions (*saññā*) which are rooted in contact (*phassa*) between sense organ and object.²⁴

The empirical world presupposed by these texts might well be described as an arena of sensory presentations in which external objects are dependent upon a cognizing consciousness and vice versa. The empirical world of things and objects is not conceived of as independent of their cognition, just as cognition is not seen isolated from the objects which are cognized. Mrs. Rhys Davids emphasizes this point in regard to the nature of the mind or consciousness by claiming that early Buddhism was not concerned with the "mind" but with "minding," that is, with mind in relationship to the objects of sensation and perception.²⁵ This conception of the phenomenal world as a dynamic process of the interaction of sense objects, sense organs, and sense consciousness factors is further illustrated by the development of the classification of the eighteen *dhatus* in later Pāli literature. The *dhatus*, or fundamental bases of existence, include the six sense organs, their objects of contact, and the six forms of resultant consciousness (*viññāṇa*).

If, as the *suttas* assume, empirical realities are dynamic and fluid fields of distinct forms of consciousness interacting with sensory objects, it follows that impermanence will be one of the characteristic traits of the phenomenal world. Since objects and consciousness are symbiotically related in a state of constant interdependence, it is impossible to discover any degree of permanence within the sensory realm. As E. R. Sarachandra writes: "We perceive forms with our eyes, hear sounds with our ears and get attached to them. But the things we get thus attached to are constantly changing . . . (and) the world of constant change has no permanent reality."²⁶ The "obsessed" (*paṇāca*) consciousness is bound to objects of sensory perception, mistaking empirical objects as permanent entities when, in fact, they are only objects of consciousness changing from moment to moment as our perceptions of them change.

If the phenomenal world is viewed as partially or largely shaped by consciousness (*viññāṇa*), then, on one level, consciousness functions as the medium in which empirical existence takes place. In this capacity *viññāṇa* has

²³ *Majjhima Nikāya*, 1:111-112.

²⁴ *Pali-English Dictionary*, p. 412.

²⁵ C. A. F. Rhys Davids, *op. cit.*, p. 234f.

²⁶ *Buddhist Psychology of Perception* (Colombo: The University of Ceylon Press, 1958), p. 11.

the power to effect the origination or cessation of the world.²⁷ Another consequence is that *viññāṇa* becomes the sine qua non for the birth, growth, and development of conscious existence within the phenomenal world.²⁸ In a dialogue between Ānanda and the Buddha in the *Mahānidāna Suttanta* of the *Dīgha Nikāya*, for example, the Buddha states that *viññāṇa* is the cause of name and form (*nāma rūpa*), that if consciousness (*viññāṇa*) were not to descend into the mother's womb there would be no birth, and that without consciousness there would be no further evolution of life.²⁹ This nearly quasi-substantive conception of *viññāṇa* is, in the opinion of Wijesekera, also expressed in the terms, *samvattanika-viññāṇa* (rebirth-consciousness), and *viññāṇa-sota* (stream of consciousness) or *bhava-sota* (stream of becoming).³⁰

Viññāṇa as mind or consciousness, in brief, is an expression of a mode of becoming, a condition characterized by diversity and impermanence. In this usage *viññāṇa* does not mean full cognition but is ". . . a sort of anoetic sentience that occurs before the object is completely apprehended."³¹ At this level, *viññāṇa* represents no formal power or control in and of itself, but rather the formless weakness and pain (*dukkha*) of disordered chaos. It is consciousness which arises when sense objects stimulate sense organs. Perhaps it could be said that at this stage *viññāṇa* is merely reactive consciousness or awareness. It is, therefore, a state of nonfreedom, of dependence upon phenomenal diversity and bondage to the objects of sense. It is, as it were, a universal human condition from which man must extract himself.

The condition of bondage to plurality and impermanence is, indeed, the profane in its most radical connotation. The Theravādin's quest for salvation is to escape from this condition, to negate its threat of confusion and disorder. But where are the possibilities for creating a sacred cosmos from this chaos? Do they lie within man's own consciousness or is the source only to be found in some outside force? These questions bring us to a second basic use of *viññāṇa* in the Pāli Nikāyas, namely, *viññāṇa* as a mode of knowledge.

Clues as to the nature of this knowledge are found throughout the *suttas*. For example in the *Dhātu Vibhāṅga Sutta* of the *Majjhima Nikāya*, *viññāṇa* as the sixth *dhātu* beyond the five bases or elements of earth, water, fire, air and space is characterized as a knowledge which is able to distinguish between pleasure and pain, one of the fundamental dualities of the phenomenal world.³² *Sukha* and *dukkha* refer not simply to pleasure and pain as psychological

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Wijesekera, *op. cit.*, p. 255.

²⁹ *The Dīgha Nikāya*, 3 vols., ed. T. W. Rhys Davids and J. Estlin Carpenter (London: Luzac & Co., 1903-1911), 2:62 (hereafter cited as *Dīgha Nikāya*).

³⁰ Wijesekera, *op. cit.*, pp. 255-256.

³¹ Sarachchandra, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

³² *Majjhima Nikāya*, 2:242.

components of existence in the sensory world, but to its ontological character as well. *Viññāṇa*, therefore, as knowledge of the distinction between pleasure and pain or happiness and suffering, appears to be a discriminating mode of knowledge in regard to the true nature of reality. An identical use of *viññāṇa* is found in the *Mahāvedalla Sutta* of the *Majjhima Nikāya* where it is said that by *viññāṇa* one discriminates the pleasurable from the painful and the neutral.³³ In the same *sutta*, the text goes on to say that *viññāṇa* is called knowledge because one discriminates by means of it (*viññāṇā ti . . . tasmā viññāṇan ti vuccati*).³⁴ Furthermore in the *Vimāṇsaka Sutta* of the *Majjhima Nikāya* it is said that "the Tathāgata should be examined in order to know (*viññāṇāya*) whether he is perfectly enlightened or not."³⁵ *Viññāṇa* in these instances must be seen as a mode of knowledge or a cognitive state which, by its power of discrimination, has *within itself* the possibility of becoming more than mere sensory awareness. It has, in other words, at least some power of self-transcendence.

Viññāṇa in the Pāli Nikāyas, in brief, presents two different possibilities which fit well into our interpretative schema. It can mean, on the one hand, man's empirical consciousness which by nature is bound to the objects of sense. This level may be considered as the profane, when that which is most essential to human existence (that is, *viññāṇa*) is bound by its attachment to sensory objects and totally without self-controlling power. On the other hand, *viññāṇa* as a mode of knowledge implies that it has the power of transcending involvement in the sensory world; thus, in the *Kevaddha Sutta* of the *Dīgha Nikāya* it is asked:

Where do earth, water, fire and wind,
And long and short, and fine and coarse,
Pure and impure, no footing find?
Where is it that both name and form
Die out, leaving no trace behind?

On that the answer is:

The intellect (*viññāṇa*) of Arahatsip . . .³⁶

It rests within *viññāṇa* itself to progress toward the ultimate. This progress is a result of knowledge attained through a discriminating understanding of the impermanent nature of the phenomenal world.

³³ *Ibid.*, 1:292. Cf. Jayatilleke, *op. cit.*, p. 434f.

³⁴ *Majjhima Nikāya*, 1:292.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 1:318f.

³⁶ *The Dialogues of the Buddha (Dīgha Nikāya)* 3 vols., trans. T. W. Rhys Davids and C. A. F. Rhys Davids, Sacred Books of the Buddhists (London: Luzac & Co., 1899–1921), 1:283.

This progression is marked in particular by a scheme of spiritual training or meditation known as *jhāna* or *samāpatti*, the context in which the question of saving knowledge arises. Without digressing into this arena, it will be merely noted that the acquisition of spiritual states is a refinement of consciousness (*viññāṇa*). Such a progressive refinement is indicated by the so-called seven stations of consciousness. These describe the movement of *viññāṇa* from consciousness of matter, to the dying out of the consciousness of sense-reaction, to the turning away from consciousness of the manifold, to the consciousness of infinite space, to the consciousness of infinite consciousness.³⁷ Here is represented a freeing of *viññāṇa* from attachment to the mundane to a more universal awareness of the nature of itself and of reality. Such liberation is denoted even more forcefully by other terms in the Pāli Nikāyas which must be briefly mentioned.

Viññāṇa is able to rise above its bondage to the world of sense objects through the power engendered by objective analysis. This form of transcending knowledge, is illustrated by a cluster of related words denoting reflective cogitation, contemplative observation and rational discrimination. Among them are included such terms as, *vīmaṃsā*, *anupassanā*, *paṭisaṅkhā*, *paṭisaṅcikkhāti*, and *peccavekkhāti*.³⁸

Vīmaṃsā denotes consideration, examination and investigation.³⁹ In its use in the *suttas* it is frequently associated with the attainment of higher powers, praiseworthy concentration, and even insight into the nature of ultimate reality itself. Thus in *Dīgha Nikāya* III.222, *vīmaṃsā-samādhi* is one of the four stages to *iddhi* or supranatural powers; in the *Anguttara Nikāya* *vīmaṃsā* is described in "The Book of the Tens" as one of the conditions of the higher life of the Buddhist saint;⁴⁰ and in *Anguttara* I.297, insight into the nature of the ultimate appears to be contingent on a detached examination (*vīmaṃsā*) of "... resentment, infatuation, wrath, enmity, hypocrisy, delusion, treachery, stubbornness, impetuosity, pride . . . (etc.)"⁴¹

Anupassanā, denoting contemplation, observation, looking at, is also essential to the development of true wisdom.⁴² For example, through *anupassanā* the *bhikkhu* analyzes his body into such components as feelings and mind, and understands their impermanent nature.⁴³ Furthermore, it is said to lead to a

³⁷ *Dīgha Nikāya*, 3:253; 2:68.

³⁸ Important terms omitted from this list are *vicāra* and *vitakka*. They are, in my opinion, more appropriately discussed in relationship to *jhāna*.

³⁹ *Pali-English Dictionary*, p. 644.

⁴⁰ *The Book of Gradual Sayings (Anguttara Nikāya)* 5 vols., trans. F. L. Woodward and E. M. Hare (London: Oxford University Press, 1932-1936), 5:65 (hereafter cited as *The Book of Gradual Sayings*).

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 1:297.

⁴² *Pali-English Dictionary*, p. 39.

⁴³ *The Book of Kindred Sayings*, 5:261.

“... vision of things not taught before . . . ,” to knowledge, insight, wisdom and light.⁴⁴ A related term, *samanuṇṇassanā*, is seen to be integral to the means by which the hindrances (*nivāraṇa*) blinding the individual to higher realities are overcome.⁴⁵

An important stage in the development of *viññāṇa* beyond bare sensory consciousness is the simple act of being objectively aware of particular human acts and activities, especially those conducive to the pleasure of the senses. Thus the *Majjhima Nikāya* admonishes the monk to reflect carefully (*paṭisaṅkhā*) while eating, and to think over (*paṭisaṅcikkhati*) the householder life.⁴⁶ Reflective thought is like a mirror which catches the image of every act and thought of the person; hence, the Buddha admonishes Rāhula to reflect (*paccavekkhati*) again and again in doing every act, speaking every word, and thinking every thought.⁴⁷

The consequences of analytical and reflective thought, on the one hand, are ethical. By the power of discrimination (*bāla paṭi saṅkhāna*) one abandons “... immorality of deed in body, speech and thought . . . and conducts himself in utter purity.”⁴⁸ *Paṭisaṅkhāna*, however, also leads to *bhāvanā*, “cultivation,” “making-become,” which is conducive to yet higher goals of mindfulness and detachment.⁴⁹ Analytical or discriminative knowledge, therefore, represents not only self-conscious awareness or even rational understanding but is also the power by which the individual becomes “other” than he is. In discriminating, analytical thought inherent in consciousness (*viññāṇa*) itself, there rests the power of changing the very structure of life. Through the attainment of knowledge, the individual is able to control his environment rather than be controlled by it. *Viññāṇa* comes to mean not merely a sensory consciousness dispersed among the multifarious and impermanent object-realities of the empirical world, but a consciousness which has analyzed and understood that world to the point of controlling and, hence, transcending it.

INTUITIVE KNOWLEDGE: PAÑÑĀ

We have seen that *viññāṇa* characterizes mundane existence both as the ground of sentient existence and as the means of enabling the individual to gain power

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 5:157.

⁴⁵ *Dīgha Nikāya*, 1:73.

⁴⁶ *Majjhima Nikāya*, 1:273.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 1:415.

⁴⁸ *The Book of Gradual Sayings*, 1:47.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 1:48. Mrs. Rhys Davids has discussed the word *bhāvanā*, in several of her writings. See her *Sakya or Buddhist Origins* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1931), p. 93f. Although she has been justly criticized for interpreting this and similar terms to mean becoming more of a “self,” the notion of *bhāvanā* as “making-become” or becoming other than what one presently is, represents a helpful interpretation. That is, early Buddhism clearly implies that right knowledge brings about a change of one’s being.

over himself and his world. As a mode of knowledge, *viññāṇa* functions soteriologically as a means to a higher reality. This reality, on one level of discourse, can be identified as *nibbāna*. As a polar term to *viññāṇa*, however, it may also be discussed as intuitive knowledge or *paññā*. In our usage, *paññā* represents both the nature of consciousness vis-à-vis the ultimately real as well as the mode of knowing ultimate reality. *Viññāṇa* and *paññā* are both forms of consciousness and modes of knowledge, although they differ in function and type. The function of *viññāṇa* as a mode of knowledge is primarily to help control the consciousness through analytical and discriminating understanding of the empirical world. This control function is not an end in itself, but rather points beyond itself to a higher end or goal. *Paññā*, on the other hand, does not function as a control but rather as a release, a freeing of the consciousness to a knowledge of the Ultimate itself, a knowledge defying the categories of rational discrimination. In this sense *paññā* may be classified as a nonrational, intuitive or a synthetic type of knowledge in contrast to *viññāṇa* as a rational and analytical type.

In the Nikāyas the condition of mundane existence is loss of freedom because consciousness (*viññāṇa*) is bound to empirical objects through sensory perceptions (*saññā*). It has been shown, furthermore, that *viññāṇa* has the power within itself to rise above mere sensation to higher cognitive states. By means of rational analysis, *viññāṇa* perceives the implicit dualities and conflicts typical of the empirical world. It thereby progresses to higher and higher levels of understanding which, however, are still qualified by an inevitable attachment to the senses. Eventually a point is reached where this attachment is broken, and there emerges a new way of knowing and being.

The *Āṇaṇjasappāya Sutta* of the *Majjhima Nikāya* discusses this progression and change in a form typical of the *suttas*. It points out that perceptions (*saññā*) related to sense desires (*kāma*) are ruled by Māra, hence, resulting in an evil and immoral consciousness.⁵⁰ This condition can be changed only when consciousness (*citta*) is developed to a level of true permanence (*āṇaṇja*) which is the highest attainment of wisdom (*paññā*).⁵¹ As another passage in the *Majjhima Nikāya* puts it, perfect knowledge (*aññā*) comes only through gradual training,⁵² attainment, and progress.⁵³ One of the most obvious illustrations of the fact that *paññā* results from an extended period of discipline and gradual training is the division of the Noble Eightfold Path into the categories of *sīla*, *samādhi*, and *paññā*. Wisdom or true knowledge (*paññā*) is fully

⁵⁰ *Majjhima Nikāya*, 3:262.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Aññā* generally refers to perfect knowledge, the knowledge of Arahantship, saving knowledge. The use of *paññā* I am developing in this article is identical with this meaning of *aññā*.

⁵³ *Majjhima Nikāya*, 1:479.

achieved only at the conclusion of a period of development, the length of which depends upon the spiritual ability and the effort of the individual concerned.

The goal achieved by this progressive realization is above all a goal characterized by freedom (*vimutti*). Again and again the *suttas* point to the fact that one who enters the way (*magga*) to salvation has entered on the freedom of the consciousness (*cittovimutti*), freedom through intuitive wisdom (*paññā-vimutti*).⁵⁴ Such freedom is likened to *abhiññā*, a suprarational knowledge, which is perfect.⁵⁵ The model of the *religieux par excellence* is one who is endowed with intuitive wisdom (*paññā*) and freedom (*vimutti*) or a "knowledge-vision-freedom" (*vimuttiñānadassana*).⁵⁶

Freedom by itself is, of course, merely an abstraction and the Pāli *suttas* are quite concrete about that from which the individual of intuitive wisdom is freed. In brief, the man of *citto paññā vimutti* is freed from those attachments to the objects of the phenomenal world controlling his consciousness, blinding him to an awareness of his true nature and the world in which he lives, and proscribing his ability to transcend himself and his environment. The word used in the Pāli texts for this binding attachment to the phenomenal world is *āsava*, literally an "outpouring." Through ignorance (*avijjā*), sensuous desire (*kāma*), and the wish for becoming (*bhāva*) an individual is literally "poured out" into the material world. He is defined by all of the objects and immediate goals of the world of sensory reality; hence, a condition of freedom becomes absolutely impossible.

Freedom in any religious tradition, of course, is more than merely freedom from. It is a freedom to as well. Early Buddhism is no exception to this rule. In this case it is a freedom to *paññā*, a new insight (*vipassanā*) and seeing-knowing (*ñāṇa-dassana*). The individual who has attained to *paññā*, having overcome the impediments of the senses, is enabled to know in a new way. It is a knowing no longer tied to the fields of sense, to sense objects and organs in the manner of empirical consciousness. *Paññā*, then, represents the new consciousness of "rebirth" or transformation. It is the noumenal consciousness empowered to know not only the true nature of phenomenal reality, but ultimate reality itself. Because it represents a mode of consciousness like *viññāṇa*, *paññā* is able to perceive the ultimately real "face-to-face" just as *viññāṇa* is able to perceive the phenomenal world as it really is. *Paññā*, therefore has been called an extrasensory "seeing" (*dassana*) or perception.⁵⁷ It is a form of perception in that it knows directly, but it is extrasensory in that it is not dependent upon the senses or the objects of sense.

Paññā as insight (*vipassanā*) is the knowledge of the nature of things, or

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 1:77.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Jayatilleke, *op. cit.*, p. 432.

the knowledge and insight of things as they are (*yathā bhūta ñāṇadassana*).⁵⁸ If you will, it is the acknowledgment of the impermanence (*anicca*) of the phenomenal world and its inherent suffering (*dukkha*), but from the perspective of the knowledge of *nibbāna* rather than from the perspective of the mundane. It is possible for the empirical consciousness to arrive at a cognizance of the impermanence of the phenomenal world by rational methods, but until that knowledge is realized from the perspective of the ultimately real its consequences are limited. The knowledge of the nature of things is that aspect of *paññā* described in the two stages of the Noble Eightfold Path as right views and right intentions. Within the Theravāda tradition it is most often characterized as the Four Noble Truths.

Knowledge of the nature of things is not sufficient for salvation. It must be supplemented by the knowledge-and-vision of things, that is, absolute freedom (*vimutti-ñāṇadassana*). It is the knowledge attained by the Buddha at his enlightenment when he is reported to have said, "there arose in me the knowledge and insight that my salvation is unshakable, that this is the last birth and that there is no further birth."⁵⁹ "Freedom-knowledge" complements "nature-of-things knowledge." The latter is the knowledge of things as they are empirically seen from the perspective of what they might become, whereas the former grasps this truth in the light of the ultimately real (*nibbāna*). The insight of *paññā*, therefore, may speak in descriptive terms of impermanence, conditionality and so on, but the "vision" aspect of *paññā* makes only such simple assertions as emptiness (*suñña*) and signlessness (*animittatā*).

As Edward Conze points out, the term *suñña* is not used in the Theravāda tradition as extensively as *anicca* or impermanence;⁶⁰ nevertheless, its limited use serves as an important means by which to indicate the vision aspect of *paññā*. References occur in the *Āṅguttara Nikāya* where the Buddha is made to say that his discourses are ". . . deep and deep in meaning, transcendental, dealing with the Void (*suññatā*) . . .";⁶¹ the *Culasuññatā Sutta* describes a method for the development of a true, changeless, and pure emptiness;⁶² and the *Ākaṅkheyya Sutta* refers to the monk who is calmed (*samatha*) and who has transcended every perceptual form as a "cultivator of empty places."⁶³ As the last reference indicates, *suñña* returns us to the notion of *paññā* as freedom of the mind or consciousness (*cetovimutti*). This freedom may be best delineated in the *suttas* in the sequence of *appamāṇā* (immeasurable),

⁵⁸ For a discussion of *vipassanā* by a contemporary meditation teacher see the detailed presentation by Ledi Sayadaw, "The Manual of Insight" [*Vipassanā Dīpanī*] *The Wheel* 31/32 (Kandy, Ceylon: Buddhist Publication Society, 1961).

⁵⁹ *Majjhima Nikāya*, 1:167.

⁶⁰ *Buddhist Thought in India* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1962), p. 59.

⁶¹ *The Book of Gradual Sayings*, 1:68.

⁶² *Majjhima Nikāya*, 3:104.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 1:33. See also *The Middle Length Sayings*, 1:41.

ākiñcaññā (nothingness), *suññatā* (emptiness) and *animittatā* (signlessness).⁶⁴ *Suññatāceto vimutti* or “freedom of the mind that is emptiness” refers to the fact that essential reality abides beyond the particulars of the phenomenal world. The above limited references appear to indicate that salvation-knowledge as *suñña* denotes not only the negation of form associated with phenomenal world but also a reality beyond form. *Paññā* perceives this reality as *suññatā*, not mere emptiness, but as that ultimately real which gives meaning to the world of multiplicity.

Along with *suñña* or *suññatā*, the term *animittatā* (signlessness) is an important nondescriptive indicator of the “freed mind” or consciousness (*ceto-vimutti*).⁶⁵ It denotes more than the inadequacy of the human intelligence to grasp the ultimately real. It implies, rather, that human consciousness operating on a higher level (that is, *paññā*) can, indeed, know the ultimately real, that universal and absolute ground which by definition transcends the limits of finite knowledge.

Theravāda Buddhism makes the optimistic claim that a man can know the ultimately real by his own efforts. To truly know this reality is to know it directly and to know directly assumes that one participates in that reality. It is, therefore, of utmost importance that salvation-knowledge or *paññā* is described as a “seeing-knowing” (*ñāṇa-dassana*). Since what is “seen” is radically other than what is ordinarily perceived, the vision aspect of *paññā* must also be radically other than the modes of knowledge appropriate to the mundane world. If this claim is accurate, that is, if *paññā* as *ñāṇa-dassana* is decisively other than empirical consciousness or *viññāṇa*, then the nature of the relationship between these two forms of knowing becomes a crucial question. Do they in some way complement each other or are they so radically different in nature and function that finally there is no relationship between the two?

Writing in *Mélanges Chinois et Bouddhiques*, La Vallée Poussin uses a dialogue among the monks, Saviṭṭha, Musīla, and Nārada in the *Saṃyutta Nikāya* as a typology to represent two differing approaches to *nibbāna*, the rational and the mystical. In the dialogue Saviṭṭha asks Musīla and Nārada whether “apart from belief, apart from inclination, apart from hearsay, apart from argument as to method, apart from reflection on and approval of an opinion” did they have a knowledge of the conditioned nature of the phenomenal world and that the ceasing of it was *nibbāna*.⁶⁶ Musīla replied that he knew (*jānāti*) and saw (*passati*); hence, for him the hindrances (*āsavas*) to the ultimately real had been stripped away and he had attained to Arahatsip.

⁶⁴ *Majjhima Nikāya*, 1:297.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 1:296.

⁶⁶ *The Book of Kindred Sayings*, 2:81–82.

Nārada for his part, stated that he had the right insight that the “ceasing of becoming” was *nibbāna* but that he was not an Arahant for whom the intoxicants had perished.⁶⁷ Louis de la Vallée Poussin comments:

“Musīla et Nārada . . . représentent assez bien le ‘rationalisme’ et la ‘mystique.’ Musīla possède ‘la sainteté’ parce qu’il ‘sait’ ou ‘connait.’ Nārada ne se considère pas comme un saint parce qu’il n’a pas touché le Nirvāṇa avec son corps. On peut, sans imprudence, discerner dans les sources bouddhiques, anciennes ou scholastiques, deux théories opposées, . . . la théorie qui fait du salut une oeuvre purement ou surtout intellectuelle; la théorie qui met le salut au bout des disciplines, ascétiques et extatiques.”⁶⁸

Without venturing further into the details of La Vallée Poussin’s argument, the general perspective that the “intellectual” and the “ecstatic” or “rational” and “mystical” are two opposing means to the ultimately real in Pāli Buddhism is severely challenged by an analysis of *viññāṇa* and *paññā*.

One of the most important *suttas* in the Nikāyas illustrating the nature of the relationship between the rational-analytical and the mystical-intuitive approaches to the ultimately real is the *Mahāvedalla Sutta* in the *Majjhima Nikāya*. There, in a dialogue between the venerable Sāriputta and Koṭṭhita the Great, the issue of the relationship between “intuitive wisdom” (*paññā*) and “discriminating consciousness” (*viññāṇa*) is enjoined. A person is said to be “intuitively wise” when he comprehends suffering, the arising of suffering, and suffering’s cessation.⁶⁹ Discriminating consciousness is so called because it discriminates (*vijānāti*) pleasure and pain and what is not pleasure and pain.⁷⁰ Having so delineated the natures of *paññā* and *viññāṇa*, Koṭṭhita asks Sāriputta if the two are associated or dissociated, a question to which Sāriputta replies, “That which is intuitive wisdom, your reverence, and that which is discriminative consciousness, these states are associated, not dissociated . . .”⁷¹ Within the soteriological quest the two forms of knowledge seem to presuppose one another so that, ultimately, any absolute distinction becomes impossible: “Whatever one comprehends . . . that one discriminates; whatever one discriminates that one comprehends . . .”⁷² Accepting the proposition that *viññāṇa* and *paññā* are associated Koṭṭhita then asks in what way they differ. To this question Sāriputta replies that *paññā* is to be developed whereas *viññāṇa* is “for apprehending.”⁷³ Perhaps this reply offers another way of

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ “Musīla et Nārada: Le Chemin du Nirvāṇa, “*Mélanges Chinois et Bouddhiques*,” 5 (Jul., 1937): 189–190.

⁶⁹ *Majjhima Nikāya*, 1:292.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ *Ibid.* See also *The Middle Length Sayings*, 1:351.

⁷² *Majjhima Nikāya*, 1:292.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 1:293.

expressing Jayatilleke's contention that *viññāṇa* seems to apply to "cognition" in general, whereas *paññā* applies more specifically to the understanding and development of "spiritual truths."⁷⁴ In any case, this dialogue provides a specific illustration of the symbiotic relationship that may be said to exist between *viññāṇa* and *paññā* in the *suttas*.

In conclusion, let me summarize what appears to be a recognizable and justifiable position vis-à-vis a typology of saving knowledge in the Pāli *suttas*. Both *viññāṇa* and *paññā* can be interpreted to mean consciousness, the former the consciousness apropos of the phenomenal and the latter apropos of the noumenal. *Viññāṇa* as empirical consciousness has an innate tendency to become attached to things and, hence, to lose its freedom. In fact, *viññāṇa* cannot be conceived except in terms of sensory spheres, that is, consciousness, sense organs and sense objects. Within itself however, *viññāṇa* has the power to rise above mere sensation or sensory perception. By analytic means it can recognize the impermanence and essencelessness of the phenomenal world. A higher reality, however, can only be assumed. *Viññāṇa* cannot know the ultimately real itself precisely because this reality transcends the senses to which *viññāṇa* is bound. It is at this point that *paññā* comes into the picture; for, whereas *viññāṇa* might recognize the dualities of phenomenal reality (e.g., pleasure and pain), it cannot know the implications of these dualities from the perspective of the realization of *nibbāna*. *Paññā*, as I have suggested, fulfills both of these functions. That is, *paññā* as the noumenal consciousness has a transcendental insight (*vipassanā*) into the nature of the phenomenal world, as well as a direct vision (*dassana*) of the ultimately real. *Paññā*, therefore, represents the freeing of the mind or consciousness (*citto mano viññāṇa vimutti*) to an unlimited realization, the undesignated totality which the ground of being represents in all religious traditions.

Having developed such a seemingly definitive position, I must quickly reiterate a qualification made at the outset of this study. The Pāli *suttas* do not present a consistent view of either *viññāṇa* or *paññā*. I have, therefore, within the limitations of my analysis, imposed a schematization or a typology on materials in the Pāli texts that are, in fact, much more ambiguously defined. In defense of this interpretation, however, two points must be made: (a) there is support for the general position taken both within the *suttas* and by scholars of Buddhism; and (b) my primary purpose has not been to offer an exegesis of the Pāli *suttas* but to arrive at an interpretative understanding of the soteriological nature and function of knowledge in Theravāda Buddhism.

As a postscript to this interpretation of saving knowledge in the Pāli *suttas*, a general comment might be in order regarding later developments in Buddhism. In the Pāli *sutta* literature, I have contended that the two levels of

⁷⁴ Jayatilleke, *op. cit.*, p. 435.

understanding or modes of knowledge represented as *viññāṇa* and *paññā* presuppose each other as integral parts of the path to the ultimate goal, *nibbāna*. Subsequent developments, however, seemed to associate each mode of knowledge with differing trends of Buddhist thought. The Abhidhamma tradition of the Theravādins or Ceylonese Vibhajavādins appears to take the analytical mode to one extreme and the Mādhyamika School of the Mahāyāna does the same with the intuitive mode. This claim is not to suggest that the Abhidhammika elaboration of the categories of *citta*, *cetasika*, and *rūpa* is necessarily inimical to the realization of *nibbāna*, nor that the Mādhyamika emphasis on *prajñā* as the integral principle comprehending all aspects of cognition had no relationship to analysis; however, in each case different levels of understanding become the focus of attention.

Both trends are anticipated in the Pāli *suttas* where the two modes of knowledge are symbiotically related. As is often the case in the history of religion, however, those elements which exist in dynamic tension in the early phases of a tradition may become separated and sometimes dangerously isolated in its later phases. This observation is not intended to cast a negative light on either the much maligned Abhidhammika tradition or the much admired Mādhyamika. Rather, it is meant to suggest that common problems from different streams of Buddhism are often more clearly understood in the light of Pāli *sutta* material.