

Does Paññā Excel Ñāṇa?

(A Study with reference to Sutta Piṭaka)

A number of words to explain the epistemological terms can be found in Buddhism. They are ñāṇa, paññā, abhiññā, vijjā, and vipassanā. In this study, attention is paid to paññā and ñāṇa. The root of these two words is ‘ñā’ which can be translated as ‘consciousness’, ‘knowledge’, or ‘understanding’. The word paññā consists of the prefix ‘pa’ and the root ‘ñā’. ‘Pa’ is an intensifier which can be translated as ‘higher’, ‘greater’, ‘supreme’ or ‘premium’. According to etymology, the meaning of this word is supreme knowledge. The word ñāṇa encompasses the root ‘ñā’ and the suffix ‘ṇa’. The suffix ‘na’ is used in ing-form. Therefore, the literary meaning of the word ñāṇa is knowing.

Ñāṇa means what you know. Paññā means the capacity to judge how much and what you do with knowing. Ñāṇa is to be obtained and paññā is to be developed. Ñāṇa is the awareness and understanding of facts, truth or information gained. Paññā is the ability to apply that knowledge.

All the categories of paññā elucidated in the Path of Purification can be included in the category of ñāṇa. Nevertheless, all the ñāṇas can not be included in the category of paññā. For instance, Āsavakkhaya-ñāṇa is not mentioned as āsavakkhaya-paññā in the pali canon. Hence, the purpose of this paper is to show how ñāṇa differs from paññā.

Key Words: Paññā, Ñāṇa, Pajānana, Sutta Piṭaka.

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