

The Function of Prajñā in Theravāda Buddhism: A Study of Epistemological and Ethical Transformation

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Abstract

This paper explores the dual function of prajñā (wisdom) within Theravāda Buddhist philosophy, examining its critical role in both epistemological inquiry and ethical transformation. Situated at the intersection of knowledge and liberation, prajñā is not merely an intellectual faculty but a transformative insight that underpins the entire soteriological framework of early Buddhism. Drawing on key Pāli sources such as the Majjhima Nikāya, Dhammasaṅgaṇī, and Buddhaghosa's Visuddhimagga, the study investigates how prajñā operates as a mode of valid cognition capable of directly apprehending the impermanent, unsatisfactory, and non-self-nature of existence. It argues that epistemological clarity in the Theravāda tradition is inseparable from moral development, with wisdom serving as the catalyst for ethical purification and existential freedom. By analyzing the integration of prajñā within the Noble Eightfold Path particularly its centrality to Right View and Right Intention, this paper demonstrates that wisdom is not a theoretical abstraction but a lived, practical realization. The ethical ramifications of prajñā culminate in the cessation of suffering (dukkhanirodha), achieved through the eradication of ignorance (avijjā), craving (taṇhā), and attachment. Through this lens, prajñā is presented as the bridge between epistemic truth and ethical liberation, offering a cohesive vision of the path to awakening. The study concludes by suggesting that any meaningful understanding of Theravāda philosophy must recognize the indivisibility of knowing and being.

Keywords: Prajñā, Theravāda Buddhism, Epistemology, Ethical Transformation, Wisdom

INTRODUCTION

The quest for wisdom has always occupied a central place in philosophical and spiritual traditions across cultures. In the context of Theravāda Buddhism, however, wisdom (*prajñā*) is not merely an intellectual virtue or speculative endeavor; it is the cornerstone of liberation itself. Rooted in early canonical texts and refined through centuries of interpretive exegesis, *prajñā* emerges as both an epistemic and ethical force, a faculty that not only discerns truth but also dismantles the foundations of suffering. This dual function of *prajñā*, straddling the domains of cognition and conduct, makes it an indispensable subject of inquiry in understanding the holistic framework of Theravāda philosophy. Theravāda Buddhism, often

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regarded as the most ancient extant school of the Buddhist tradition, presents a systematic vision of the path to liberation, structured through doctrines such as the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path, and the doctrine of *anattā* (non-self). Within this schema, *prajñā* assumes a pivotal role, particularly in its formulation as the final constituent of the threefold training (*sīla, samādhi, paññā*) and as a crucial element of *Right View* and *Right Intention* in the Eightfold Path. Far from being a mere culmination of meditative insight, *prajñā* operates as a mode of valid knowing, a cognitive tool that directly perceives the impermanent (*anicca*), unsatisfactory (*dukkha*), and non-substantial (*anattā*) nature of all phenomena. This epistemological function is not isolated from moral transformation; rather, it is intrinsically bound to the ethical purification of the practitioner.

The distinction between intellectual knowledge (*ñāṇa*) and experiential insight (*vipassanā*) is particularly instructive in the Theravāda tradition. While the former may involve conceptual understanding, it is the latter which is an insight grounded in meditative realization that qualifies as true *prajñā*. This insight is cultivated not merely for the sake of knowledge but as a means to overcome *avijjā* (ignorance), which is seen as the primary root of *saṃsāric* bondage. Through the progressive refinement of perception and the eradication of defilements (*kilesas*), *prajñā* leads to a radical ethical reorientation—one that culminates in the cessation of craving (*taṇhā*), the cessation of suffering (*dukkhanirodha*), and ultimately, the attainment of *nibbāna*. This paper seeks to explore the multifaceted role of *prajñā* in Theravāda Buddhist philosophy by examining its epistemological underpinnings and ethical implications. Drawing upon primary sources in Pāli such as the *Majjhima Nikāya*, the *Dhammasaṅgaṇī*, and Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhimagga*, the study aims to demonstrate that *prajñā* is not an abstract or speculative construct but a dynamic, practical realization integral to the Buddhist path. The discussion will interrogate how valid cognition in Theravāda is tied not only to philosophical clarity but to existential transformation. In doing so, it will reveal that any serious engagement with Theravāda thought must treat the processes of knowing and being as deeply intertwined making *prajñā* both the compass and the engine of the path toward awakening.

Prajñā as Epistemic Insight in Theravāda Buddhism

In the Theravāda tradition, epistemology is not pursued as an abstract philosophical exercise but is deeply embedded in the existential problem of suffering and liberation. Within this framework, *prajñā* often translated as “wisdom” or “insight” functions as the highest form of valid cognition (*pramāṇa*), one that reveals the true nature of reality beyond conceptual fabrication. Unlike Western epistemologies that often prioritize empirical or rational means of knowledge acquisition, the Theravāda approach emphasizes direct experiential insight (*vipassanā*) as the means by which one gains liberating knowledge. It is in this context that *prajñā* arises not as a passive recognition of truth but as an active, penetrative seeing into the impermanent, unsatisfactory, and non-self-characteristics of conditioned existence.

According to the *Majjhima Nikāya*, wisdom is said to arise from hearing the Dhamma (*sutamayā paññā*), reflecting upon it (*cintāmayā paññā*), and finally through meditative insight (*bhāvanāmayā paññā*). This progression outlines the layered process by which *prajñā* is cultivated: beginning with conceptual understanding and culminating in direct, transformative realization. Of these, it is the third which is wisdom born of meditative development, that is

emphasized as the most authentic and effective. This aligns with the broader Theravādin emphasis on praxis over speculation, where knowledge is not considered valid unless it results in ethical purification and existential release.

One of the core insights yielded by *prajñā* is the perception of the Three Marks of Existence: *anicca* (impermanence), *dukkha* (unsatisfactoriness), and *anattā* (non-self). These are not mere metaphysical doctrines but experiential truths that are directly apprehended through contemplative insight. In this regard, *prajñā* operates analogously to a cognitive instrument that dissolves the illusions of permanence, autonomy, and intrinsic satisfaction which are illusions that undergird the cycle of *saṃsāra*. The *Visuddhimagga* of Buddhaghosa elaborates this function of wisdom in meticulous detail, particularly in the stages of insight (*vipassanā-ñāṇa*) that lead up to the realization of *nibbāna*. Here, wisdom is presented as a discriminative faculty that observes the arising and passing away of phenomena with clarity and detachment, thus undermining ignorance (*avijjā*) at its root. Moreover, in the Abhidhamma texts such as the *Dhammasaṅgaṇī*, *prajñā* is listed among the wholesome mental factors (*kusala cetasikas*) and is closely linked with *Right View* (*sammā-diṭṭhi*), the initial and foundational factor of the Noble Eightfold Path. This alignment highlights its normative role not only as a descriptive tool for understanding reality but as a prescriptive guide for ethical and spiritual progress. In this sense, Theravāda epistemology does not bifurcate truth and value; rather, it unifies them in the figure of the wise person who sees clearly and acts virtuously. Thus, in Theravāda philosophy, *prajñā* functions as a special mode of cognition that transcends discursive reasoning and sensory observation. It is a luminous knowing that cuts through delusion, one that is indispensable not only for philosophical clarity but for achieving the ultimate goal of Buddhist practice: the cessation of suffering.

Prajñā as Ethical Transformation: The Moral Dimension of Wisdom

While *prajñā* in Theravāda Buddhism functions as a profound mode of knowing, its significance cannot be confined to epistemology alone. The tradition places equal emphasis on the ethical dimension of wisdom, framing it as a dynamic force that reshapes the practitioner's moral character and behavior. Far from being a passive cognitive state, *prajñā* is portrayed as a transformative insight that initiates and sustains ethical refinement. This moral dimension of *prajñā* is essential to the soteriological vision of Theravāda Buddhism, wherein wisdom and virtue operate in mutual reinforcement.

In the Theravādin view, ethical transformation arises from a direct confrontation with the nature of reality as revealed through insight. The recognition of *anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anattā* does not result in nihilism or detachment from moral responsibility. Instead, it fosters a deep sensitivity to the conditioned nature of actions and their consequences. As the delusion of selfhood dissolves, so too does the tendency toward egocentric behavior like greed, hatred, and ignorance often known collectively as the three unwholesome roots (*akusala-mūla*). Wisdom, in this context, becomes the catalyst for uprooting these defilements, thus enabling the practitioner to embody ethical clarity and restraint.

Theravāda texts often emphasize the integrative nature of the three trainings (*sīla*, *samādhi*, and *paññā*), where none can be perfected in isolation. Wisdom without moral discipline

becomes ungrounded; morality without insight risks rigidity or superficiality. In this framework, *prajñā* serves as the internal compass that continuously reorients conduct toward wholesomeness. Buddhaghosa, in the *Visuddhimagga*, elaborates on this interdependence by showing how wisdom illuminates ethical failings that might otherwise remain hidden, allowing for more conscious and intentional moral choices. Moreover, *prajñā* plays a pivotal role in Right Intention (*sammā-saṅkappa*), the second factor of the Noble Eightfold Path. Here, it guides the aspirant away from thoughts rooted in sensual desire, ill will, and cruelty, and toward intentions marked by renunciation, goodwill, and compassion. The ethical impact of *prajñā* is thus not confined to external behavior but extends into the mental architecture of volition and motivation. Through the cultivation of insight, the practitioner begins to dismantle habitual patterns that perpetuate suffering for self and others.

This moral function of *prajñā* also manifests in the progressive purification of the mind, leading to a state of non-reactivity and equanimity. As wisdom matures, it gives rise to a spontaneous ethical elegance which are the actions informed not by external codes but by an internalized clarity that discerns what is skillful (*kusala*) from what is unskillful (*akusala*). In this way, *prajñā* serves as both the eye that sees the path and the energy that walks it.

Ultimately, the ethical transformation catalyzed by *prajñā* is not ancillary but central to the process of liberation. It is through wisdom that ethical conduct becomes liberated from self-interest and grounded in universal compassion. Thus, the moral dimension of *prajñā* completes its function not only as a means to see reality as it is, but to live in alignment with that vision.

Integration of Prajñā in the Eightfold Path: A Holistic Framework

The Noble Eightfold Path (*Ariya Atṭhaṅgika Magga*) is the central praxis model in Theravāda Buddhism, structured to lead practitioners toward the cessation of suffering. Within this path, *prajñā* is not confined to a single stage but infuses multiple dimensions of spiritual cultivation. It is formally represented by the first two factors which are *Right View* (*sammā-diṭṭhi*) and *Right Intention* (*sammā-saṅkappa*) collectively categorized as the “wisdom group” (*paññākkhandha*). Yet, *prajñā* subtly informs all eight limbs, functioning as the integrating force that aligns the practitioner’s understanding, intention, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and concentration toward liberation. *Right View* is regarded as the gateway to the path and is directly shaped by *prajñā*. It involves the clear understanding of the Four Noble Truths and the law of dependent origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*). This form of insight is not philosophical assent but experiential comprehension that transforms one’s worldview. With *prajñā* illuminating *Right View*, the practitioner ceases to perceive phenomena through the lens of permanence or selfhood, thereby weakening the grip of delusion. Importantly, *Right View* is dynamic as it evolves from a provisional, faith-based comprehension (*mundane right view*) to a penetrative, liberating insight (*supramundane right view*) through the cultivation of wisdom.

The second factor, *Right Intention*, reflects the ethical outgrowth of *prajñā*. Here, wisdom channels volition toward three key intentions: renunciation, non-ill will, and harmlessness. These intentions are not adopted through mere willpower but emerge naturally as one gains insight into the impermanent and non-self-nature of phenomena. As craving and aversion are rooted in deluded perception, their dissolution through *prajñā* leads to intentions grounded in

clarity and compassion. Thus, wisdom does not only clarify what is true but it also shapes what is willed.

Even beyond the wisdom group, the remaining limbs of the path which are ethical conduct (*sīla*) and mental discipline (*samādhi*)—are guided and sustained by *prajñā*. For instance, *Right Speech*, *Right Action*, and *Right Livelihood* become refined when informed by insight into the karmic consequences of unwholesome behavior. Similarly, *Right Effort*, *Right Mindfulness*, and *Right Concentration* deepen through wise discernment, ensuring that the practitioner’s mental cultivation does not devolve into mere technique or mechanical repetition. In this way, *prajñā* functions as a supervisory force that safeguards and enhances the entire path. What emerges from this integration is a vision of *prajñā* not as a discrete faculty, but as a permeating quality that harmonizes the different aspects of the path. This comprehensive role underscores its function as both the root and the fruit of Buddhist practice. It initiates the journey through *Right View*, matures through direct meditative insight, and culminates in liberating knowledge (*vijjā*) that brings about the destruction of ignorance and suffering.

By being fully embedded in the Eightfold Path, *prajñā* transcends the dichotomy between knowing and doing. It becomes the principle that binds epistemic clarity to ethical embodiment, thereby rendering the path to awakening both coherent and complete.

The Eradication of Ignorance: Prajñā and the Cessation of Suffering

At the heart of the Theravāda Buddhist path lies the imperative to eradicate *avijjā* (ignorance), the primal cause of *dukkha* (suffering). Ignorance is not merely a lack of information, but a deep-seated misapprehension of reality, an existential delusion that sustains the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth (*samsāra*). It is within this existential structure that *prajñā* operates as the liberating counterforce: not simply to replace false views, but to dissolve the entire scaffolding upon which ignorance is constructed. The doctrine of *paṭiccasamuppāda* (dependent origination) identifies ignorance as the first link in a chain of causation that gives rise to suffering. From ignorance arises volitional formations (*saṅkhārā*), which in turn condition consciousness and the entire structure of personal experience. In this light, *prajñā* is not just another link in the chain but it is the transformative force that severs the chain itself. As the *Samyutta Nikāya* states, “With the arising of wisdom, ignorance is destroyed.” This succinct formulation affirms that only through the penetrating clarity of insight can the conditioned continuity of suffering be undone.

Importantly, this eradication is not achieved through metaphysical speculation or dogmatic belief. Theravāda Buddhism maintains a rigorously empirical stance: liberation must be verified through direct experience. *Prajñā* emerges precisely as this experiential knowing and seeing reality “as it is” (*yathābhūtaṃ ñāṇadassanaṃ*). When a practitioner directly perceives the arising and cessation of phenomena, the illusion of permanence, satisfaction, and selfhood collapses. In that moment of radical seeing, the internal momentum of craving (*taṇhā*), clinging (*upādāna*), and becoming (*bhava*) is interrupted, and the mind tastes freedom. The process by which *prajñā* dismantles ignorance is articulated with precision in the *Visuddhimagga*. Buddhaghosa outlines a series of insight knowledges (*vipassanā-ñāṇa*) that progressively refine perception. These include knowledge of impermanence (*aniccānupassanā-ñāṇa*),

knowledge of dissolution (*bhaṅga-ñāṇa*), and equanimity toward formations (*saṅkhārupekkhā-ñāṇa*), among others. As each stage deepens the practitioner's understanding, ignorance is stripped away not by force, but by clarity. The culmination of this process is the attainment of *magga-ñāṇa* (knowledge of the path) and *phala-ñāṇa* (knowledge of the fruit), leading to the realization of *nibbāna*.

This eradication of ignorance has both epistemic and ethical implications. On the one hand, it brings about *vijjā* that is true knowledge, that dispels all delusion. On the other, it naturally results in ethical purity, as the roots of greed, hatred, and delusion no longer find fertile ground. The mind that sees clearly no longer reacts blindly; it responds with compassion, restraint, and wisdom. In this way, *prajñā* completes its function not merely as a light in the darkness, but as the means by which the darkness itself ceases to exist. Thus, *prajñā* is not merely a remedy for ignorance but it is its antidote. Where ignorance binds, wisdom liberates. And in the Theravāda vision of freedom, this liberation is not a remote ideal but a real and present possibility, made accessible through the cultivation of penetrating insight.

Conclusion: Knowing as Being — Prajñā and the Unity of Insight and Liberation

Throughout the course of this study, we have examined *prajñā* in Theravāda Buddhist philosophy not merely as a cognitive tool or moral guide, but as a foundational force that integrates epistemology and ethics into a single, coherent path of liberation. This concluding section draws together the various threads of analysis and beginning with the epistemic function of *prajñā*, extending into its moral ramifications, its structural embedding within the Eightfold Path, and culminating in its transformative power to dismantle ignorance and suffering.

What emerges from this inquiry is a distinctively non-dual vision of wisdom: one in which the act of knowing is inseparable from the act of becoming. *Prajñā* in the Theravāda tradition does not operate in the abstract, speculative domain of detached reason. Rather, it is grounded in direct experience and oriented toward a clear soteriological goal, the cessation of *dukkha*. It is this teleological orientation that distinguishes *prajñā* from merely intellectual faculties. Wisdom here is not a matter of accumulating truths, but of perceiving the truth of existence so deeply that one's entire way of being is transformed. The paper began by establishing the epistemic integrity of *prajñā*, particularly its capacity to reveal the impermanent, unsatisfactory, and non-self nature of phenomena. In Theravāda texts such as the *Majjhima Nikāya* and *Dhammasaṅgani*, *prajñā* is closely associated with valid cognition—an insight that cuts through conventional appearances and leads to clear seeing (*yathābhūta-dassana*). This insight is cultivated in a progressive manner, moving from conceptual understanding to meditative realization. Crucially, this is not passive observation but an active, discerning engagement with reality.

We then turned to the ethical implications of *prajñā*, arguing that wisdom is the foundation of moral transformation. As *prajñā* dismantles the self-centered delusions of permanence and autonomy, it concurrently weakens the roots of unwholesome behavior—greed, hatred, and ignorance. The wise person in the Theravāda framework is not just someone who knows more, but someone who is more—more compassionate, more restrained, more attuned to the

interdependent nature of all things. Wisdom thus becomes the pivot around which ethical purification revolves.

The analysis of the Noble Eightfold Path revealed the centrality of *prajñā* in structuring the Buddhist spiritual journey. As the source of *Right View* and *Right Intention*, *prajñā* frames the ethical and meditative disciplines that follow. Yet, its influence extends far beyond the initial steps. Wisdom permeates all eight limbs of the path, guiding ethical conduct and deepening meditative practice. In this sense, *prajñā* is not a single phase of development but the integrating principle that ensures coherence across the entire path.

Finally, we explored the culminating function of *prajñā*—the eradication of ignorance. Drawing on the structure of *paṭiccasamuppāda* and the insights of the *Visuddhimagga*, we saw how wisdom disrupts the causal chain of suffering by directly dismantling its root. Here, *prajñā* is no longer one among many faculties but becomes the very condition for liberation. Without wisdom, there is no freedom. With it, *nibbāna* becomes accessible—not as a future event, but as a transformation of vision in the present moment.

In light of this comprehensive role, several recommendations emerge for both scholars and practitioners:

- 1. Reframe Buddhist Epistemology in Soteriological Terms:** Academic treatments of Buddhist epistemology often isolate it from ethical and practical concerns. This paper suggests that such isolation misrepresents the Theravādin perspective, where knowing and liberation are fundamentally intertwined. Future studies should treat insight as both a means and an end—simultaneously cognitive and existential.
- 2. Reconsider the Role of Experience in Ethical Theory:** Western moral philosophy often relies on rational deliberation or normative codes. The Theravādin model offers a different possibility: a morality that arises organically from clear seeing. Integrating this model into cross-cultural ethical discourse could enrich the field of moral philosophy with a non-dual, insight-based approach.
- 3. Prioritize Integrative Pedagogy in Buddhist Studies:** In both monastic and academic contexts, *prajñā* should be taught not as a discrete topic, but as a principle that spans epistemology, ethics, and meditation. A fragmented curriculum risks undermining the very unity that *prajñā* embodies.
- 4. Revisit the Concept of Liberation through the Lens of Insight:** Liberation in Theravāda is not the product of ritual, belief, or asceticism alone, but of radical clarity. This has implications for how we conceptualize freedom—not as escape from the world, but as transformation of our mode of perception within it.

In conclusion, *prajñā* in Theravāda Buddhism is best understood as a unifying thread that weaves through the entire fabric of the path. It is at once the eye that sees, the hand that releases, and the heart that lets go. By illuminating the nature of reality, *prajñā* does not merely change what one knows—it changes what one is. It is this indivisibility of knowing and being that lies at the core of Theravāda philosophy and offers a profound model for how wisdom can liberate, both in thought and in life.

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