

An Evaluation of the Concept of Prajñā-pāramitā in Buddhism

Nguyen Van Nhut, Research Scholar, Department of Buddhist Studies, Delhi University

Introduction

Buddhism is regarded as a kindly compassion and scientific tradition, compassionating with the world a noble path for realization of the reality of life and solution for problems of the world. Along with the compassion, a system of thought (wisdom – a noble path), one of the most significant features that any tradition in the world should possess is very essential, especially in such a scientific and modern world. Buddhism definitely, appears to possess completely the two vital and particular features, like one of famous quotations of distinguishes scientist at first half of twenty century – Albert Einstein mentioned by Donald S. Jr. Lopez as follows:

'The religion of the future will be a cosmic religion. It should transcend a personal God and avoid dogmas and theology. Covering both the nature and the spiritual, it should be based on a religious sense arising from the experience of all things, natural and spiritual as a meaningful unity. If there is any religion that would cope with modern scientific needs it would be Buddhism ...' (Lopez 2008: 1)

According to many sūtras of Mahāyāna tradition, particularly Lotus sūtra (*Saddharma-pundarīka*) mentions that the ultimate goal or the main reason for all Buddhas have appeared from past to present time to the world is to open or show 'the perfect wisdom of Buddha' of all human beings. In addition, the term '*prajñāpāramitā*' is named to one of the most important sūtras appeared around 2nd century B.C, and collaborated completely at the end of 2nd century A.D, is *Prajñāpāramitā* sūtra (Perfection of Wisdom).

Furthermore, the term *prajñāpāramitā* (*paññā-pāramī* in Pāli) in Early Buddhism is defined as the tenth stage of the ten *pāramīs*, from which an Arhat has cultivated and experienced before entering into the path of Buddhahood. Besides, *prajñāpāramitā* is esteemed as the sixth stage of the Bodhisattva's path in later Buddhism, corresponding to the ten levels of attainment in *Avatamsaka* sūtra in

Mahāyāna Buddhism.

It is above mentioned, the concept of *prajñāpāramitā* has been spent various stages in its process and development through definite time. It thus, is very necessary and exciting to examine the process and development of the concept of *prajñāpāramitā* in various ways of understanding in significant period of Buddhism.

Terminology of the *prajñā-pāramitā*

The Pāli word *pāramī* derives from *pārama*, 'supreme,' or 'extremity' because of the binding of two words; *pāra+ma*, adherently the term of *pāra* with meaning 'other side', 'utmost reach or fullest extent' or 'end or limit of anything' and the suffix '*ma*' for formation of superlative form. Thus it suggests the eminence of the qualities which must be fulfilled by a *bodhisattva* in the long course of his spiritual development. But the cognate *pāramitā*, the word preferred by the Mahāyāna texts and also used by Pāli writers, is sometimes explained as *pāra + mitā*, 'gone to the beyond,' thereby indicating the transcendental direction of these qualities.

In Buddhism, the term of *pāramitās* or *pāramīs* in general refer to the perfection or culmination of certain virtues. Adherently, these virtues are cultivated as the way of purification, purifying karma and helping the aspirant to live an unobstructed life, while reaching the goal of enlightenment.

The pāramitās are so called, because they are acquired during a long period of time, and are supremely pure in their nature. They also transcend the virtues or qualities of Śrāvakas and the Pratyeka-Buddhas, and lead to the highest result (Dayal 1999: 166).

Relating to the above meaning, in Pāli canon, *Majjhima* Nikāya, the Buddha so many times had concerned about the term 'go beyond, have gone beyond, or having crossed over' when he uttered to

An Evaluation of the Concept of Prajñā-pāramitā in Buddhism

his disciples about the Arhanthood as follows:

Monks, like unto those bulls who were the sires and leaders of the herd and who, having cut across the stream of the Ganges, went safely beyond, are those monks who are Arahants, the outflows extinguished, who have lived the life, done what was to be done, laid down the burden, attained their own goal, the fetters of becoming utterly extinguished, freed by perfect gnosis. For these, having cut cross Mara's stream, have gone safely beyond (Horner 2004: 225-26).

Furthermore, in *Samyutta Nikāya*, when talking about the characteristic of the Arahant, the Buddha uses a synonym for the Arahant is 'the Brahmin who, crossed over, gone beyond, stands on dry land' (Woodward 2005: 175).

Position of the *Prajñā-pāramitā* in Early Significant Buddhist Doctrine

The primary message of the Buddha points out to people is the way of life that leads beyond suffering. At initial time, the Buddha is considered as an ethical teacher and reformer other than a philosopher because he always avoids discussing about any metaphysical question, which does not lead to the ultimate goal of life – the state of freedom from all sufferings.

Instead of discussing or replying metaphysical questions, the Buddha tries to enlighten people on the most important questions of life's problems such as sorrow, its origin, its cessation and the path leading to its cessation. It thus has come to be known as the four Noble truths (*catvāri ārya satyāni*).

The *Prajñāpāramitā* is part of the third Truth on 'cessation of *dukkha*' in the Four Noble Truths, and the final destination of the Noble Eightfold Path also. It is hold that ignorance (*avidyā*) of realities is the cause of our bondage and sufferings, and liberation from these can only be achieved by only by the 'worthy ones', who have attained *nirvana* (Warder 1999: 67). The liberation or *nirvāna* (also called as *mukti* or *moks a*) actually means the stoppage of the process of birth and rebirth or gone beyond to the opposite site of suffering – the state of bliss, happiness.

Therefore, the Third Noble Truth or the cessation of all suffering regarded as *nirvāṇa*, is called as *prajñāpāramitā* – the state of liberation, happiness, the state of 'perfect wisdom'.

Two Concepts of Dharma in Early Buddhism and Two Truths in *Abhidharma*

It is noted that *dharma* is regarded as the most basic concept in Buddhism. Accordingly, the Buddha, the enlightened one attained enlightenment by understanding *dharma*s, of which the world and its inhabitants are composed, as a result, the term *dharma* refers to not only the Buddha's teachings but to the true nature of human existence.

In early Buddhism, relating to the term *dharma*, there is only one *paramārtha dharma* (unconditioned or ultimate *dharma*), namely *nirvāṇa* is recognized also as the *prajñā-pāramitā*. And all the rest are regarded as *samskrta dharma*s (conditioned *dharma*s).

Furthermore, in *Abhidharma* particularly *Sarvāstivādin*, the term *dharma*, recognized as the existence of body, mind, external world, etc. is grouped into two kinds of truths. These are Conventional Truth (*samvrti sat*) and Ultimate Truth (*paramārtha sat*), according to which only three categories of things, namely, analytical cessation (*pratisankhya - nirodha*), non-analytical cessation (*aprasankhya - nirodha*) and space (*ākāśa*) are classed as the Ultimate Truths.

However, according to *Abhidhamma* in *Sthaviravādin*, the Ultimate Truth is classified into four categories, namely, *citta* (mind), *cetasika* (mental factors, associated mentality), *rūpa* (physical or material form), and *nibbāna* (extinction, cessation).

Although the Ultimate Truth is classified into three or four categories, *pratisankhya - nirodha* and *nibbāna* is recognized as the concept of *prajñā-pāramitā*.

Bodhisattva's idea: Ten *pāramīs* in early Buddhism or six *pāramitās* in later Buddhism

The concept of Bodhisattva is found in the earliest stratum of *Tripitaka* texts ((Warder 1999: 338), as referring to the Buddha before his enlightenment, and also to other Buddhas before their

enlightenments. In Pāli sources, there are ten perfect qualities a Bodhisattva must perform perfectly during his/her previous lives, which leads to Buddhahood occur frequently in the *Jātaka*.

In Mahāyāna, the earliest sūtras appear to be a collection relating to the concept of Bodhisattva called the *Ratnakūṭa*, a great sūtra containing forty-nine independent chapters. In addition, it is important to note that the sūtra also refers to the basic doctrine of the six 'perfections' (*pāramitā*). The six perfections are: generosity, virtue, toleration, energy, meditation and wisdom that the bodhisattva must perfect all during his/her countless lives mentioned as in many *Jātakas*.

Furthermore, ten *pāramīs* in early Buddhism or six *pāramitās* in later Buddhism are also regarded as 'transcendental perfections of quality' mentioned by D. Keown (2003: 212). Besides, the transcendental perfections of quality are considered as the ten or six stages or levels of a Bodhisattva's career in which the last or ultimate stage is the transcendental perfection of wisdom (*prajñā-pāramitā*).

Therefore, the *prajñā-pāramitā* is the last level of Bodhisattva's idea during his/her career mentioned in ten perfections of early Buddhism or six perfections of later Buddhism.

***Prajñā-pāramitā sūtra* and *Śūnyatā* doctrine of Mādhyamika system**

The term '*prajñā-pāramitā*' reminds of one of the most important sūtras of Mahāyāna tradition, whose role is as a concise summary of the key doctrines of Mahāyāna Buddhism (particularly *Mādhyamika* system), and as a supernatural power of *dhāraṇī* in *Vajrayāna* tradition.

Furthermore, the *prajñāpāramitā* sūtra, of which the earliest version considered as *astasāhasrikā prajñāpāramitā*, was probably put in writing in the 1st century BCE (Möll 2005: 96). And it is believed that this sūtra was translated into Chinese in the second century C.E by Lokaksema (Hirakawa 1993: 248), an Indo-Scythian Buddhist monk came from Kusāna (Kushan) dynasty of Northwest India.

In addition, Xuan-zang (hsuan-tsang), returned to China from India in 645 C.E. (Conze

2008: 21), with three copies of the *Mahā-prajñāpāramitā* sūtra (Great *Prajñāpāramitā*), in 600 fascicles. Later then, he translates the *Prajñāpāramitā hrdaya* sūtra, the smallest version with two hundred-fifty characters only. Today, this smallest version is recited and memorized everyday in most ritual of Mahāyāna tradition as the most common sūtra, particularly in Asian Buddhist countries.

Now it is time to move to the philosophical background, a great theme of the *Prajñāpāramitā* is *śūnyatā* (emptiness) – the emptiness of all things that we might be tempted to think truly and ultimately exist of and in themselves. Adherently, all *dharmas* are like dreams, magical illusions, reflected images, like the moon reflected in water, a shadow, a magical creation, like the stars, dewdrops, a flash of lightning, etc. described in the *Prajñāpāramitā Vajracchedikā* sūtra (shortly called as Diamond sūtra), they are there but they are not there, and if we reach out for them, we find nothing to hold on to.

Mādhyamika system is found by a famous Buddhist monk Nāgārjuna, whose writings appear to elucidate the fundamental theme of the *Prajñāpāramitā* sūtra (Perfection of Wisdom), particularly based primarily on the doctrine of two Truths, the doctrine of *Anātman* (no-self), and the theory of *Pratīyasamutpāda* (dependent origination).

The fact that, the *Mādhyamika* system does not contain an elaborate philosophical argument, but simply try to point to the true nature of reality, especially through the use of paradox. The basic premise is a radical non-dualism, in which any dichotomist way of seeing things is denied. Therefore, phenomena are neither existent, nor non-existent, but are remarked by emptiness (*śūnyatā*), an absence of any essential, unchanging nature.

Conclusion

It is recognized that there are various ways of understanding the concept of *prajñāpāramitā* depending on particular period of Buddhist thought of two main divisions – Early Buddhism and Later Buddhism.

In early Buddhism, the period between Buddha's enlightenment and one hundred years after

An Evaluation of the Concept of Prajñā-pāramitā in Buddhism

Buddha's death, the main doctrine focusing on the way leading to the cessation of suffering, *prajñāpāramitā* thus, is recognized as the cessation of suffering - nirvana - the ultimate Buddhist goal of liberation.

In sectarian and later Buddhism, concept of *prajñāpāramitā* is esteemed as transcendental truth of the theory of the two Truths. Besides, relating to the doctrine of Bodhisattva's idea, the *prajñāpāramitā* is regarded as the last stage of six *pāramitās*.

At final stage, the *prajñāpāramitā* represents a genre of Mahāyāna Buddhist scriptures addressing the aspiration for the 'perfection of wisdom'. Adherently, *prajñāpāramitā* sūtra with fundamental philosophy of 'śūnyatā' on which based the formation of Mahāyāna thoughts arise, particularly *Mādhyamika* system.

Through this paper, it may be possible to make a general connection of the concept of *prajñāpāramitā* among Buddhist thoughts from time of the Buddha until Mahāyāna Buddhism and may be nowadays. The world at present moment is facing with too much conflict between various clashes or political parties of the same nation or nation with nation, which makes dreadful suffering for human beings. Therefore, each person should have a deep insight or wisdom (*prajñā*) in seeking for the best solution in order to solve many universal problems in modern age.

References

1. Conze, Edward. 2008, *The Prajñāpāramitā literature*, 4th edn., New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal.
2. Dayal, Har. 1999. *The Bodhisattva Doctrine in Buddhist Sanskrit Literature*, reprint, New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
3. Garfiel, J.L.(trans). 1995. *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*, New York: Oxford University Press.
4. Hirakawa. A. 1993. *A History of Indian Buddhism: From Śākyamuni to Early Mahāyāna*, ed. and trans. P. Groner, New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
5. Horner, I.B. (Trans). 2004. *The Majjhima Nikāya: The Collection of The Middle Length Sayings*, vol.1, reprint, New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
6. Lopez Jr, Donald S. 1988. *The Heart sūtra Explained: Indian and Tibetan Commentaries*, New York: State of University of New York Press.
7. Lopez Jr, Donald S. 2008. *Buddhism and Science: A Guide for the Perplexed*, USA: University of Chicago Press.
8. Mäll, Linnart. 2005. *Studies in the Aśāhasrikā prajñāpāramitā and other Essays*, New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
9. Murti, T.R.V, 1955. *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism: A Study in the Mādhyamika System*, London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd.
10. Warder A.K. 1999. *Indian Buddhism*, New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
11. Williams, M. 1986. *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, reprint, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
12. Woodward, F.L. (trans). 2005. *The Book of The Kindred Sayings*, vol.4, reprint, New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.

"Do not believe in what you have heard; do not believe in the traditions because they have been handed down for generations;
do not believe in anything because it is rumoured and spoken by many;

do not believe merely because a written statement of some old sage is produced;

do not believe in conjectures, do not believe in that truth to which you have become attached by habit;

do not believe merely the authority of your teachers and elders. After observation and analysis, when it agrees with reasons and it conducive to the good and gain of one and all, then accept it and live up to it. Pray do not, therefore, believe me when I come to the philosophical issues until and unless you are convinced of what I say, either as a sequel to proper reasoning or by means of a practical approach"

