

Sampajañña—the Constant Thorough Understanding of Impermanence

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In this paper, we will discuss how *sampajañña* (or *sampajāno*) is explained by the Buddha in the *suttas* and how the term can be correctly translated into English.

Whenever the Buddha was asked to describe *sati* (mindfulness or awareness), his explanation invariably included the term *sampajañña*.

*Katamā ca, bhikkhave, sammā-sati? Idha, bhikkhave, bhikkhu kāye kāyānupassī viharati ātāpī sampajāno satimā, vineyya loke abhijjhā-domanassaṃ.*¹

And what, meditators, is right awareness? Here, a meditator dwells ardently, with constant thorough understanding and right awareness, observing the body in the body, having removed craving and aversion towards this world (of mind and matter).

From this it becomes evident that according to the Buddha, whenever there is *sammā-sati* or *satipaṭṭhāna*, it is always with *sampajañña*. That means it is with *paññā* (wisdom). Otherwise it is mere *sati*, which is mere remembrance or awareness.

In the *Sutta Piṭaka*, the Buddha gave two explanations of the term *sampajañña*. In the *Saṃyutta-nikāya* the Buddha defines *sampajāno* as follows:

*Kathaṅca, bhikkhave, bhikkhu sampajāno hoti? Idha, bhikkhave, bhikkhuo viditā vedanā uppajjanti, viditā upaṭṭhahanti, viditā abbattham gacchanti; viditā saññā uppajjanti, viditā upaṭṭhahanti, viditā abbattham gacchanti; viditā vitakkā uppajjanti, viditā upaṭṭhahanti, viditā abbattham gacchanti. Evaṃ kho, bhikkhave, bhikkhu sampajāno hoti.*²

And how, meditators, does a meditator understand thoroughly? Herein, meditators, a meditator knows sensations arising in him, knows their persisting, and knows their vanishing; he knows perceptions arising in him, knows their persisting, and knows their vanishing; he knows each initial application (of the mind on an object) arising in him, knows its persisting, and knows its vanishing. This, meditators, is how a meditator understands thoroughly.

In the above statement, it becomes clear that one is *sampajāno* only when one realizes the characteristic of impermanence, and that too on the basis of experience of sensation (*viditā vedanā*). If this is not realized through *vedanā*, then it is merely an intellectualization, as our fundamental contact with the world is based on sensation. It is through sensation that direct experience occurs. The statement further indicates that *sampajāno* lies in experiencing the impermanence of *vedanā*, *vitakkā* (the initial application of the mind on an object) and *saññā* (perception). Here we should note that impermanence of *vedanā* is to be realized first because according to the Buddha:

*Vedanā-samosaraṇā sabbe dhammā.*³

Everything that arises in the mind is accompanied by sensation.

The second explanation given by the Buddha of *sampajañña* emphasizes that it must be continuous. He states:

*Kathaṇca, bhikkhave, bhikkhu sampajāno hoti? Idha, bhikkhave, bhikkhu abhikkante paṭikkante sampajānakārī hoti. Ālokite vilokite sampajānakārī hoti. Samiñjite pasārite sampajānakārī hoti. Saṅghāṭi-patta-cīvara-dhāraṇe sampajānakārī hoti. Asite pīte khāyite sāyite sampajānakārī hoti. Uccāra-passāva-kamme sampajānakārī hoti. Gate ṭhite nisinne sutte jāgarite bhāsīte tuṅhī-bhāve sampajānakārī hoti.*⁴

And how, meditators does a meditator understand thoroughly? Again, meditators, a meditator in going forwards and backwards understands impermanence thoroughly, in looking straight ahead and sideways understands impermanence thoroughly, in bending and stretching understands impermanence thoroughly, in wearing the robes and carrying the bowl understands impermanence thoroughly, in chewing and drinking, eating and savouring understands impermanence thoroughly, in attending to the calls of nature understands impermanence thoroughly, in walking, standing, sitting, sleeping and waking, speaking and remaining silent understands impermanence thoroughly.

The same passage has been repeated in other *suttas*, including the section on *sampajañña* under *Kāyānupassanā* in the *Mahāsatipatṭhāna-sutta*.

The emphasis on the continuity of *sampajañña* is very clear. One should develop constant thorough understanding of impermanence in whatever one does: in walking forward and backward, in looking straight and sideways, in bending and stretching, in wearing robes and so on. In sitting, in standing and even in sleeping one has to experience constant thorough understanding of impermanence. This is *sampajañña*.

With proper understanding of the teaching of the Buddha, it becomes clear that if this continuous *sampajañña* consists only of the thorough understanding of the processes of walking, eating and other activities of the body, then it is merely *sati*. If, however, the constant thorough understanding includes the characteristic of arising and passing away of *vedanā* while the meditator is performing these activities, then this is *paññā*. This is what the Buddha wanted people to practise.

The Buddha describes this more specifically in a passage from the *Aṅguttara-nikāya*, using language that is bound to bring to mind the *sampajāna-pabba* of the *Mahāsatipatṭhāna-sutta*:

*Yataṃ care yataṃ tiṭṭhe, yataṃ acche yataṃ saye, yataṃ samiñjaye bhikkhu, yatamenam pasāraye, uddham tiriyaṃ apacinaṃ, yāvataṃ jagato gati, samavekkhitā ca dhammānaṃ khandānaṃ udayabbayaṃ.*⁵

Whether the meditator walks or stands or sits or lies, whether he bends or stretches,

above, across, backwards, whatever his course in the world, he observes the arising and passing away of the aggregates.

Thus the emphasis is on the continuity of awareness of *anicca* (impermanence) with the base of body sensation. The Buddha frequently stressed that the meditator should not lose the thorough understanding of impermanence even for a moment: *sampajaññaṃ na riñcati*.⁶ For a meditator who follows his advice on the proper practice of Vipassana, being *sampajāno* without any interruption, the Buddha gives the following assurance: either the meditator will attain the highest stage (*arahata*) or the penultimate stage (*anāgāmitā*).⁷

Every language, however rich it may be, has its limitations and we cannot expect even the richest of languages to be capable of giving precise equivalents to the technical Pāli words used by the Buddha. If the term *sampajañña* is translated too concisely into English its meaning can be lost. It has usually been translated as “clear comprehension,” “bare comprehension,” etc. Superficially these translations appear to be correct. Some have taken this to mean that one must merely have clear comprehension of bodily activities. The limitations of this translation may have had the effect of misleading some meditators on the path of Dhamma. The Buddha clearly emphasized the thorough understanding of *anicca* in all bodily and mental activities. Therefore, to understand the term *sampajañña*, we have translated it as: “The constant thorough understanding of impermanence.” It is felt that this translation conveys more fully the precise meaning of the term used by the Buddha.

Notes:

1. *Dīgha-nikāya*, VRI 2.234; PTS 2.314
2. *Saṃyutta-nikāya* VRI 3.255-6; PTS 5.180-1
3. *Aṅguttara-nikāya*, VRI 3.159; PTS 4.339
4. *Dīgha-nikāya* VRI 2.75; PTS 2.95.
5. *Khuddaka-nikāya*, *Ittirottaka*, *Catukkanipāta* VRI 84; PTS 120
6. *Saṃyutta-nikāya* VRI 2.203; PTS 4.206
7. *Dīgha-nikāya* VRI 2.235 ; PTS 2.314