

Reflection and Thinking in the Buddha Dhamma

The meditators are rightly cautioned about indulging in speculative thinking and to be mindful of uncontrolled thinking since these lessen the efficacy of meditation in reducing the mental defilements. Sometimes this is interpreted as a fiat against thinking *per se*. We need to appreciate that wise thinking is extremely important for progress on the path. The term reflection is used to refer to this wise thinking which often implies investigation of the nature of experience. *Dhammavicaya* – investigation of the dhammas – is the second factor of Enlightenment and if we do not develop it, surely our meditation will not bear the desired fruit.

In the suttas we find two words often used to indicate ‘reviewing’ of the experience - *paccavekkhati* and *paṭisañcikkhati* – usually translated as ‘reflects’, ‘reviews’, ‘discriminates’ or just ‘considers’. We can understand the real meaning of these words by referring to some of their use in the suttas.

A clear understanding of the meaning of the word *paccavekkhati* emerges from the famous discourse of the Buddha given to Rahula [MN 61]:

“Taṃ kiṃ maññasi, rāhula, kimatthiyo ādāso”ti?

“Paccavekkhaṇattho, bhante”ti.

“Evameva kho, rāhula, paccavekkhitvā paccavekkhitvā kāyena kammaṃ kattabbaṃ, paccavekkhitvā paccavekkhitvā vācāya kammaṃ kattabbaṃ, paccavekkhitvā paccavekkhitvā manasā kammaṃ kattabbaṃ

What do you think Rahula is the purpose of a mirror?

For the purpose of reflection, venerable Sir.

So too Rahula, an action with the body should be done after repeated reflection; an action by speech should be done after repeated reflection, an action by the mind should be done after repeated reflection.

The discourse goes on to further explain that reflection should be to find out whether the action would lead to my own affliction or the affliction of others. If that is so, such actions should not be undertaken; if already initiated should be stopped; and if undertaken in the past, one should confess to a senior and resolve not to repeat it. The discourse eventually concludes that purification of these three kinds of actions is possible only by such repeated reflection.

This reflection is clearly investigative thinking and highly recommended by the Lord.

In numerous other suttas we find exactly same meaning of this word. As one more example we can cite the famous *Satipaṭṭhāna* sutta: sections *paṭikūlamānasikārapabbaṃ*, and *dhātumānasikārapabbaṃ*.

Other sections indicating reflection include *navasivathikapabbaṃ* where the word *upasaṃharati*, usually translated as ‘compares’ is repeatedly used to draw attention to the impermanent nature of the body by reflecting on corpses in various states of decomposition.

The need for investigation is also brought out in the *nīvaraṇapabbam*

yathā ca anuppannassa kāmacchandassa uppādo hoti tañca pajānāti, yathā ca uppannassa kāmacchandassa pahānaṃ hoti tañca pajānāti, yathā ca pahānassa kāmacchandassa āyatim anuppādo hoti tañca pajānāti.

.... He also understands how there comes to be the arising of un-arisen sensual desire, and how there comes to be the abandoning of arisen sensual desire, how there comes to be the future non-arising of abandoned sensual desire.

This investigation is recommended for all other hindrances.

The word *paṭisañcikkhati* is also used in similar contexts; see for example [MN 151]

Puna caparaṃ, sārīputta, bhikkhunā iti paṭisañcikkhitabbam – ‘bhāvito nu kho me ariyo aṭṭhaṅgiko maggo’ti?

Again, Sariputta, a bhikkhu should consider thus. ‘Is the Noble Eightfold Path developed in me?’

The discourse then goes on to say that if he knows that the Path has not been developed by me, he should put effort in developing the Noble Eightfold Path.... And so on for other good mental attributes.

Dvedhāvitakkasutta [MN 19], wherein the Buddha talks about his own quest, indicates the utility of such reflection in subsiding defilements:

‘Attabyābādhāya saṃvattatī’tipi me, bhikkhave, paṭisañcikkhato abbattham gacchati; ‘parabyābādhāya saṃvattatī’tipi me, bhikkhave, paṭisañcikkhato abbattham gacchati; ‘ubhayabyābādhāya saṃvattatī’tipi me, bhikkhave, paṭisañcikkhato abbattham gacchati;.....

When I considered: ‘This leads to my own affliction’, it subsided in me; when I considered : ‘This leads to the affliction of others’ it subsided in me; when I considered : ‘This leads to the affliction of both’, it subsided in me;

Analytical thinking is advised in numerous Suttas; for example in the famous Anattalakkhana Sutta the Lord asks Bhikkhus to think (*maññatha*):

Taṃ kiṃ maññatha, bhikkhave: rūpaṃ niccaṃ vā aniccaṃ vā ti?

Aniccaṃ, bhante.

Yaṃ pan-āniccaṃ dukkhaṃ vā taṃ sukhaṃ vā ti?

Dukkhaṃ, bhante.

Yaṃ pan-āniccaṃ dukkhaṃ vipariṇāma-dhammaṃ, kallaṃ nu taṃ samanupassituṃ: ‘etaṃ mama, eso-ham-asmi, eso me attā’ti?

No h-etaṃ, bhante.

What do you think of this, bhikkhus: is Rūpa permanent or impermanent?

Impermanet, venerable Sir.

And that which is impermanent, is it dukkha or sukha?{

Dukkha venerable Sir.

And that which is impermanent, dukkha, by nature subject to change, is it proper to regard it as: 'This is mine. I am this. This is my atta?'

No, venerable Sir.

In fact this phrase *Taṃ kiṃ maññatha* [what do you think] is found in numerous discourses while enquiring from Bhikkhus about their understanding of a dhamma principle.

The Buddha himself recommends that every householder and bhikkhu, male or female, should repeatedly reflect on the following five facts [AN 5.57] :

Pañcimāni, bhikkhave, ṭhānāni abhiñhaṃ paccavekkhitabbāni itthiyā vā purisena vā gahaṭṭhena vā pabbajitena vā. Katamāni pañca? 'Jarādhammomhi, jaraṃ anatīto'ti abhiñhaṃ paccavekkhitabbaṃ itthiyā vā purisena vā gahaṭṭhena vā pabbajitena vā. 'Byādhidhammomhi, byādhiṃ anatīto'ti abhiñhaṃ paccavekkhitabbaṃ itthiyā vā purisena vā gahaṭṭhena vā pabbajitena vā. 'Maraṇadhammomhi, maraṇaṃ anatīto'ti abhiñhaṃ paccavekkhitabbaṃ itthiyā vā purisena vā gahaṭṭhena vā pabbajitena vā. 'Sabbhehi me piyehi manāpehi nānābhāvo vinābhāvo'ti abhiñhaṃ paccavekkhitabbaṃ itthiyā vā purisena vā gahaṭṭhena vā pabbajitena vā. 'Kammasakomhi, kammadāyādo kammayoni kammabandhu kammaṇṇasaraṇo. Yaṃ kammaṃ karissāmi – kalyāṇaṃ vā pāpakaṃ vā – tassa dāyādo bhavissāmī'ti

"There are these five facts that one should reflect on often, whether one is a woman or a man, lay or ordained. Which five?

"I am subject to aging, have not gone beyond aging.' This is the first fact that one should reflect on often, whether one is a woman or a man, lay or ordained.

"I am subject to illness, have not gone beyond illness.' ...

"I am subject to death, have not gone beyond death.' ...

"I will grow different, separate from all that is dear and appealing to me.' ...

"I am the owner of my actions,[1] heir to my actions, born of my actions, related through my actions, and have my actions as my arbitrator. Whatever I do, for good or for evil, to that will I fall heir.' ...

The sutta goes on to say that such reflection reduces intoxication with youth, with health, with life, reduces desire and passion for things and people, and the tendency of bad conduct. As one does this reflection repeatedly, the Buddha says, the factors of the path take birth. And as one develops and cultivates the path, the fetters are destroyed. Reflection can indeed be very powerful!!

On reading the suttas we cannot but conclude that wise investigative thinking – reflection - is of great importance in the Buddha Dhamma. This is the way to strengthen *dhammavicaya* and ripen our wisdom by periodically investigating the reasons for presence or absence of various tenacious defilements and the factors of Enlightenment, analysis of the consequences of our actions, checking our understanding of various dhamma principles by studying the suttas, etc. A periodic reflection of our meditative experiences is also helpful in preventing our practice from becoming 'mechanical'. Similarly, periodically reflecting on our experiences in daily life, in the light of the basic principles of Dhamma, - e.g. there is no one who is seeing, seeing is happening due to arising of *cakkhuvīññāna* , and so on – helps reduce *sakkāyadiṭṭhi*.