

***Paññā* and *Prajñā*: A Comparative Philosophical Study of Wisdom in Theravāda and Mahāyāna Buddhism**

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Introduction

Wisdom occupies a fundamental position within Buddhist philosophy as the principal means through which ignorance is overcome and liberation is realized. Unlike ordinary intellectual knowledge, Buddhist wisdom represents transformative understanding that penetrates the true nature of existence and leads to spiritual emancipation. Throughout Buddhist history, the concept of wisdom has developed through various philosophical interpretations according to different doctrinal traditions. However, wisdom remains the essential foundation of Buddhist practice and the path toward awakening.

Within the Theravāda tradition, *paññā* is understood as experiential wisdom cultivated through ethical discipline, meditative practice, and direct insight into reality. Rather than being confined to intellectual understanding, it represents a transformative quality of mind that enables practitioners to perceive existence as it truly is. This wisdom is grounded in the realization of the Four Noble Truths, Dependent Origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*), and the Three Characteristics (*tilakkhaṇa*) impermanence (*anicca*), suffering (*dukkha*), and non-self (*anattā*). Through the progressive cultivation of *paññā*, ignorance is gradually abandoned, allowing practitioners to deepen their insight and move towards liberation.

In contrast, Mahāyāna Buddhism develops the concept of *prajñā* within the *Prajñāpāramitā* tradition. *Prajñā* represents transcendent wisdom that perceives reality beyond conceptual limitations. A central aspect of Mahāyāna understanding of *prajñā* is the realization of emptiness (*śūnyatā*), emphasizing that phenomena lack independent and permanent existence. This does not imply non-existence but highlights the interdependent nature of reality. Furthermore, Mahāyāna emphasizes the inseparable relationship between wisdom (*prajñā*) and compassion (*karuṇā*), presenting wisdom as an essential quality of the Bodhisattva path, where liberation is pursued for the benefit of all beings.

Although *paññā* and *prajñā* have been extensively studied within their respective traditions, comparative philosophical examinations exploring their

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shared foundations and distinctive developments remain significant in Buddhist scholarship. Many studies examine Theravāda and Mahāyāna interpretations separately, potentially overlooking the broader philosophical relationship between these approaches. A comparative study provides a deeper understanding of how Buddhist traditions develop diverse philosophical interpretations while maintaining a common commitment to overcoming ignorance and attaining liberation.

Accordingly, this research undertakes a comparative philosophical analysis of *paññā* and *prajñā* by examining their meanings, philosophical foundations, cultivation methods, and soteriological functions within Theravāda and Mahāyāna Buddhism. The study contributes to Buddhist philosophical discourse by demonstrating both continuity and diversity in Buddhist approaches to wisdom. Furthermore, it demonstrates how different Buddhist traditions interpret awakening while preserving the shared goal of liberation from suffering.

Objective

This study aims to critically examine and compare the philosophical interpretations of *paññā* in Theravāda Buddhism and *prajñā* in Mahāyāna Buddhism. Specifically, it investigates their conceptual foundations, methods of cultivation, ethical implications, and roles in the Buddhist path toward liberation.

Research Question

How do *paññā* in Theravāda Buddhism and *prajñā* in Mahāyāna Buddhism differ and converge in their philosophical understanding of wisdom and its relationship to liberation?

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative comparative philosophical methodology based on textual analysis. Primary data are drawn from selected Theravāda and Mahāyāna canonical texts, while secondary data include scholarly books and peer-reviewed journal articles. The collected data are analysed through comparative doctrinal and philosophical interpretation to identify similarities, differences, and their implications for Buddhist understandings of wisdom.

Results

The comparative analysis indicates that both *paññā* and *prajñā* are understood as forms of liberating wisdom that play a central role in the Buddhist path to awakening. In both Theravāda and Mahāyāna traditions, wisdom extends beyond intellectual comprehension and is regarded as a direct experiential

understanding cultivated through ethical conduct, meditative practice, and insight into the nature of reality. This shared perspective highlights wisdom as a transformative process that gradually removes ignorance and supports spiritual liberation.

The analysis reveals that Theravāda Buddhism primarily interprets *paññā* as insight into the conditioned and impermanent nature of existence. Through understanding the Four Noble Truths, dependent origination, and the Three Characteristics, practitioners develop awareness that gradually removes ignorance and attachment. In this framework, wisdom serves as the highest faculty that enables individuals to attain liberation through personal realization of *nibbāna*.

The study further identifies that Mahāyāna Buddhism expands the philosophical interpretation of wisdom through the concept of *prajñā*. Particularly within the *Prajñāpāramitā* tradition, wisdom involves realizing emptiness (*śūnyatā*) and overcoming conceptual limitations regarding the existence of phenomena. *Prajñā* reveals the interconnected nature of reality and provides the philosophical foundation for the Bodhisattva path. Unlike an exclusively individual orientation, Mahāyāna emphasizes that wisdom must operate together with compassion (*karuṇā*) for the liberation of all beings.

The comparative analysis indicates that although *paññā* and *prajñā* differ in terminology, philosophical emphasis, and doctrinal expression, both traditions recognise wisdom as the essential means of transcending ignorance. The study further demonstrates that their principal distinction lies not in their ultimate purpose but in their philosophical orientation. Theravāda emphasises analytical insight leading to individual liberation, whereas Mahāyāna integrates the realisation of emptiness with compassion directed towards universal liberation. Consequently, the two traditions represent complementary rather than contradictory models of Buddhist wisdom, offering a broader philosophical understanding of the path to awakening.

Discussion

The comparative investigation reveals that *paññā* and *prajñā* represent related yet distinct expressions of wisdom within Buddhist philosophical thought. Although these concepts emerged within different doctrinal traditions, both are rooted in the shared Buddhist objective of eliminating ignorance and attaining liberation. While Theravāda and Mahāyāna articulate wisdom through different philosophical perspectives, each tradition maintains that authentic wisdom arises from direct experiential insight into the nature of reality rather than from intellectual knowledge alone.

Theravāda Buddhism emphasizes wisdom through analytical investigation and experiential realization of the conditions of existence. The cultivation of *paññā* is closely connected with the development of morality (*sīla*), concentration (*samādhi*), and insight meditation (*vipassanā*). Through understanding impermanence, suffering, non-self, and dependent origination, practitioners gradually transform their understanding of existence and progress toward liberation.

Mahāyāna Buddhism presents *prajñā* through a broader philosophical framework centred on emptiness and non-duality. This approach emphasizes that wisdom involves recognizing the absence of independent existence within all phenomena. Furthermore, Mahāyāna philosophy highlights that wisdom cannot be separated from compassion, as genuine realization naturally leads to compassionate engagement through the Bodhisattva ideal.

Although both traditions regard wisdom as indispensable for overcoming ignorance, Theravāda primarily emphasises individual liberation through experiential insight into reality, whereas Mahāyāna extends wisdom through the realisation of emptiness inseparable from compassion directed towards the liberation of all beings. Consequently, these perspectives should be understood as complementary philosophical expressions rather than opposing doctrines, together enriching the Buddhist understanding of wisdom.

In conclusion, *paññā* and *prajñā* can be understood as complementary dimensions of Buddhist wisdom that reflect both continuity and diversity within Buddhist philosophy. While each tradition provides unique interpretations regarding the nature and function of wisdom, both recognize wisdom as the indispensable path toward awakening. This comparative study contributes to contemporary Buddhist philosophical scholarship by demonstrating that doctrinal diversity within Buddhism reflects complementary approaches to wisdom rather than conflicting interpretations, thereby enriching scholarly understanding of the Buddhist path to liberation.

Keywords - Comparative Buddhist Philosophy, Mahāyāna Buddhism, *Paññā*, *Prajñā*, Theravāda Buddhism

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