

THE NOTION OF INVESTIGATION (VICAYA) IN BUDDHISM

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Abstract

Buddhism is an investigation-introduced religion. It emphasizes the investigation. This article concerns itself with the notion of investigation (vicaya) in Buddhism. The goal in this article is to give a satisfying account of (1) the Buddhist concept of investigations, (2) its methods and (3) purposes. It is mainly approached through the method of the textual studies of the Pāli canonical texts, including the utilizing of a Tibetan Buddhist text source such as *Jñānasāra-samuccaya* and some Buddhist books, describing and analyzing the Buddhist notion on investigation (vicaya). The result of this article is to present a clearer and satisfied account of the Buddhist understanding of investigation (vicaya), its methods (*ñāya*) and purposes. It is also to cast important light on such problems as the unanalyzed phenomenon of investigation (vicaya) in Theravada Buddhism, its methods and purposes.

Keywords: Buddhism; Notion; Investigation; Method, and Purpose.

Introduction

More than any other religion, Buddhism emphasizes about investigation (vicaya). Interestingly, there are many suttas concerning the subject of investigation (vicaya) contained in the Pāli Canon. But neither Buddhist scholar is devoted their intellectual stimulation on this particular subject, nor they are systematically described and analyzed the phenomenon of investigation (vicaya) in Theravada Buddhism by utilizing the various Pāli Canonical suttas.

This study concerns itself with the notion of investigation (vicaya) in the Pāli Canon of Theravada Buddhism. In particular, the study is concerned with three objectives: (1) to study the notion of investigation (vicaya) in the Pāli Canon of Theravada Buddhism, (2) to study the method (ñāya) of investigation in the Pāli Canon of Theravada Buddhism, and (3) to study the purpose of investigation in the Pāli Canon of Theravada Buddhism.

Based on these three objectives, this study intends to show that Buddhism is an investigation-based taught religion. It has its own methods of investigation. It has also its own purposes of investigation. These are some key ideas touched on in the article based on discussing questions like: (1) what is the notion of investigation in the Pāli Canon of Theravada Buddhism; (2) what does investigation look like in the Pāli Canon of Theravada Buddhism; and (3) what is the purpose of investigation in the Pāli Canon of Theravada Buddhism?

This study is mainly approached through the method of the textual studies of the Pāli Canonical texts, including some Buddhist books. It is concerned with the description and analysis of the Buddha's teachings on investigation (vicaya) found in the Pāli Canonical texts and other Buddhist texts.

The result of this study is to cast important light on such problems as the unanalyzed phenomenon of investigation (*vicaya*) in Theravada Buddhism, its methods and purposes.

The Notion of Investigation in Buddhism

Buddhism laid much emphasis on the investigation of dhamma (*dhammavicaya*). Even in Buddhism the investigation of dhamma (*dhammavicaya*) has played a central role for the attainment of the spiritual or religious liberation called *nibbāna* or the end of all suffering. Perhaps historically and Pāli canonically, Prince Siddhārtha Gautama of Kapilavastu or the Buddha's first investigation was begun with his four specific observations of life during his visits outside the palace, namely (1) an old man, (2) a sick person, (3) a corpse, and (4) a noble hermit which he never sighted before after his birth. According to Theravada Buddhist tradition, the Buddha's investigation of these four specific observations of life finally led him to begin his quest for enlightenment (Buddhahood). These four sights made a deep impression on his mind.

Some Pāli canonical evidences of the Buddhism's emphasis on investigation can be presented with the various examples of the Pāli canonical suttas and the Pāli canonical terms. For example, in the *Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta* (22) of the *Dīgha Nikāya*, dhamma is said to investigate (*dhammavicaya*). In the *Cakkavatti-Sīhanāda Sutta* (26) of the *Dīgha Nikāya*, concentration on investigation (*vīmaṃsā*) is considered as one of the four bases for spiritual power (*iddhipāda*). In the *Sangīti Sutta* (33) of the *Dīgha Nikāya*, three types of feelings, namely (1) *somanassa* (pleasurable), (2) *domanassa* (unpleasurable or displeasure) and (3) *upekkhā* (indifferent or indifference), are said to investigate. In the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* (16) (Walshe, 1995) of the *Dīgha Nikāya*,

dhamma is invited to inspect or investigate (ehipassiko) (D. II. 93). In other words, dhamma is opened to inspection and examination.

In the Anumāna Sutta (15) of the Majjhima Nikāya, one is asked to examine or review oneself three times daily. In the Vitakkasaṇṭhāna Sutta (20) of the Majjhima Nikāya, one is asked to examine distracting thoughts (dhamma) by investigating as to what is its cause and what is the cause of its cause. In the Alagaddūpama Sutta (22) of the Majjhima Nikāya, one is encouraged to examine the meaning of dhamma (teachings). In the Vīmaṃsaka Sutta (47) of the Majjhima Nikāya, the Buddha invites his disciples to make an investigation of the Buddha himself. In the Upāli Sutta (56) of the Majjhima Nikāya, the Buddha said to Upāli to make a proper investigation at first. In the Cankī Sutta (95) of the Majjhima Nikāya, the Buddha is said to investigate three dhammas, namely: (1) physical, (2) verbal and (3) mental behaviours. (Bhikkhu Ñānamoli, 1995) In the Kālāma Sutta (65) of the Aṅguttara Nikāya, the Buddha himself has advocated a charter of free investigation which is considered to be more consistent with the scientific method of science.

In the Pārileyya Sutta of the Saṃyutta Nikāya, it is recorded that dhamma is investigation-based taught by the Buddha. For example, the Buddha himself is declared in this Pārileyya Sutta that he taught the dhamma by way of investigation or investigation (S. III. 96). In the Vīṇā Sutta of the Saṃyutta Nikāya, one is thoroughly asked to investigate the five aggregates (pañca khandha) (S. II. 197). In the Parivimamsana Sutta of the Saṃyutta Nikāya, one is asked to investigate the cause or the reason or the condition or the source of a thing as to why it happens: *Taṃ kissa hetu?* What is the reason of this or that? What is the source of this suffering (dukkha)? (Bhikkhu Bodhi, 2000).

In addition to some Pāli canonical references of some Pāli suttas, there are some Pāli canonical terms which are associated with the examples of investigation, for example, *vicaya* (investigation), *vicāra* (investigation, examination), (Vism. 142; Th. 1, 1117) *vicāraṇā* (investigation, search), (Sn.

1108, 1109; J. III.73) pavicaya (investigation), (Sn. 1021; Th. 1, 593; Pug. 25; Nett. 3, 87) pravacaya (investigation), (Gethin, 2001) vīmaṃsā (examination, test or experiment, investigation, inspection, reflection), anvesa (seeking, searching, investigation), parikkhā (examination, investigation, putting to the test), upaparikkhā (investigation, examination), upaparikkhin (investigating, reflecting, testing), vinicchaya (investigation, discrimination, distinction, trial, judgment), parigaṇhana (investigation, exploration, examination, comprehension), (A. P. Buddhadatta Mahāthera, 1957) vilokana (looking at, investigation), vibhajjavāda (the religion of investigated truth; the religion of logic or reason; the doctrine of analysis) (Karunadasa, 2010), paññā (wisdom), and so forth.

The Method of Investigation in Buddhism

Now the most crucial question arising here is that what does investigation look like in Buddhism? What kind of the methodology of investigation is contained within Buddhism? To find the answers to those questions we can begin with the way Prince Siddhārtha or the Buddha has been investigated the four specific observations of life during his visits outside the palace.

Investigation begins with wonder and curiosity. It is a state of mind which is inquisitiveness to ask “hows” and “whys” of things. For example, when Prince Siddhārtha or the Buddha observed the four sights called (1) an old age man, (2) a sick man, (3) a corpse and (4) an ascetic for the first time, an active quest for information of these four sights aroused in him. It was Prince Siddhārtha’s first time in his life that he had seen four sights of these types. Therefore he had enormous curiosity to know about these four sights. His curiosity drives the quest for knowledge of these four sights. His curiosity also

brings wonders and questions. His wonders and questions can be presented as follows which can be considered as the first example of the Buddhist method (ñāya) of investigation.

In addition to the first type of the Buddhist method of investigation, the second type of the Buddhist method of investigation is found within the Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta of the Dīgha Nikāya, namely: (1) mindfulness (sati) (Anālayo, 2003) and (2) wisdom (paññā). (Davids, 1900) “Mindfulness is the method of investigation.” (Gunaratana, 2011) In the case of mindfulness (sati), it is interesting point to add here that the Buddhist ‘mindfulness’ or ‘sati’ is also used as method of investigation for the study of mental states (dhammas) in contemporary psychological investigations. It can also be a method of experiential investigation (Stanley, 2012). The third type of the Buddhist method of investigation is grounded on several methods. Among these several Buddhist methods of investigation, the first method of investigation begins by investigating a religious teacher whether or not his (1) physical, (2) verbal and (3) mental behaviour is characterized by (1) greed, (2) hatred, and (3) delusion. If after investigation one finds that a religious teacher is freed from these three poisons (kilesa or akusala-mūla), then one can proceed for further investigations which are described in the following processes:

When he [or she or one] has investigated him [a religious teacher] and has seen that he [a religious teacher] is purified from states based on greed, hatred and delusion, then he [or she or one] places faith in him [a religious teacher]; filled with faith he [or she or one] visits him [a religious teacher] and pays respect to him [a religious teacher]; having paid respect to him [a religious teacher], he [or she or one] gives ear; when he [or she or one] gives ear, he [or she or one] hears the Dhamma; having heard the Dhamma, he [or she or one] memorises it and examines the meaning of the teachings [dhamma] he [or she or one] has memorised; when he [or she or one] examines their meanings, he [or she

or one] gains a reflective acceptance of those teachings [dhamma]; when he [or she or one] has gained a reflective acceptance of those teachings [dhamma], zeal springs up; when zeal has sprung up, he [or she or one] applies his will; having applied his will, he [or she or one] scrutinizes; having scrutinized he [or she or one] strives; resolutely striving, he [or she or one] realizes with the body the ultimate truth and sees it by penetrating it with wisdom. (Ñānamoli, 1995)

This is the way of dhamma investigation. It is also the way of the discovery of truth (*saccānubodha*) recorded in the *Cankīsutta* (95) of the *Majjhimanikāya*. In terms of the above quote, it is important to clarify that the word “faith” mentioned in the above quote is not actually a blind faith or an unjustified faith. According to the context of the *Cankīsutta*, the word “faith” used in the quotation is actually a study-based faith or a research-based faith or an experience-based faith. For example, when one goes to investigate about the physical, verbal and mental behaviour of a religious teacher, what does one then do before? Actually, one is directly researching or studying about the physical, verbal and mental behaviour of a religious teacher. After that, if one finds that a religious teacher is freed from these three mental states called (1) greed, (2) hatred, and (3) delusion, then one places faith in a religious teacher. Thus the word “faith” used in the quotation is one’s own study-based faith.

The fourth type of the Buddhist method of investigation is found in the *Kālāma Sutta* in which the Buddha states that a person should only accept what they themselves have found to be true in their own experience. In other words, one’s own experience is the proper way to justify or investigate claims to knowledge. (Emmanuel, 2013) Thus experience is a method of Buddhist investigation.

The fifth type of the Buddhist method of investigation is found in the Buddha’s gold simile. In this gold simile, the Buddha said that one must not

accept his dhamma from reverence, but should try it first as gold was tried by fire. This is nicely explained in the following manner:

Just as one would examine gold through burning, cutting, and rubbing so should monks and scholars examine my words. Only thus should they be accepted, but not merely out of respect for me (Piyadassi Thera, 1964).

In relation to the above quote, it is interesting to mention a point that a senior Noble prize winning scientist introduced this Buddha's gold simile as a method of investigation to his junior researchers in his laboratory (Barash, 2014).

In addition, there are scholars who have argued and claimed that there are certain similarities in the methods of investigation between Buddhism and Science. One example of such claim of similarity is briefly stressed by a Theravada Buddhist monk scholar as follows:

The scientific spirit can be found in the Buddha's approach to spiritual Truth [dhamma]. The Buddha's method for discovering and testing spiritual Truth [dhamma] is very similar to that of the scientists. A scientist observes the external world objectively, and would only establish a scientific theory after conducting many successful practical experiments. Using a similar approach 25 centuries ago, the Buddha observed the inner world [dhamma] with detachment, and encouraged His disciples not to accept any teaching [dhamma] until they had critically investigated and personally verified its truth (Dhammananda, 2002).

The Purpose of Investigation in Buddhism

Why investigation in Buddhism? What is the purpose or reason of investigation in Buddhism? If we examine the various suttas of the Suttanta Pitaka, we can find different purposes or reasons for the Buddhist investigation. For example, in the context of the Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta (22) of the Dīgha Nikāya, the purpose of investigation is found for two reasons: the first reason is for the purpose of getting enlightenment (Bhikkhu Bodhi, 1995) when the second reason is for the purpose of overcoming one's own doubt (vicikicchā) which leads one to clarity and understanding about the Buddha's teachings. (Anālayo, 2003) Perhaps this clarity and understanding about the Buddha's teachings finally lead one to a state of belief which a person in that state will usually call experience or realization or knowledge or certainty. In the Saṅgīti Sutta (33) of the Dīgha Nikāya, the purpose of investigation is reasoned to find out a corresponding object productive of three feelings called (1) pleasure (somanassa), (2) displeasure (domanassa), and (3) indifference (upekkhā) (Walshe, 1995). In the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta (16) the Dīgha Nikāya, the purpose of inspection or investigation (ehi-passiko) is to discover the truth (dhamma) by oneself.

In the Cankī Sutta (95) of the Majjhima Nikāya, the purpose of investigation is introduced for the purpose of the discovery of truth (saccānubodha) (Bhikkhu Ñānamoli, 1995). In the Anumāna Sutta (15) of the Majjhima Nikāya, the purpose of investigation is to remove the defects in one's character. In the Vitakkasaṇṭhāna Sutta (20) of the Majjhima Nikāya, the purpose of investigation is to remove or deal with the unwholesome thoughts that may arise in the course of meditation. In the Alagaddūpama Sutta (22) of the Majjhima Nikāya, the purpose of investigation is to gain a reflective acceptance of dhamma (teachings). In the Vīmaṃsaka Sutta (47) of the

Majjhima Nikāya, the purpose of investigation is to make sure that whether the Buddha is fully enlightened one or not.

In the Vīṇā Sutta of the Saṃyutta Nikāya, the purpose of investigation is found for the seeing of this insight that no I or mine can be found with regard to the five aggregates (Bhikkhu Bodhi, 2002). In the Parivimamsana Sutta of the Saṃyutta Nikāya, the purpose of investigation is to get the cause of a thing as to why it happens such as dukkha. In the Viraddha Sutta of the Saṃyutta Nikāya, the purpose of investigation (vīmaṃsā) is found for the complete destruction of suffering.

Conclusion

Buddhism has a clear notion of investigation which is evidenced by the Buddha's biography and many Pāli suttas of the Tipiṭaka. If we look at the Buddha's biography, we can find that the Buddha's first investigation was begun with his four specific observations of life. In addition to the Buddha's biography, if we study Suttanta Piṭaka, we can find that the Buddha taught investigation to his monks and lay peoples which is available in his various discourses (suttas). The notion of investigation found in the Buddha's biography and his discourses (suttas) is something like a seeking for truth, information, or knowledge, dhamma inspection and examination, investigation of the source of the cause, enlightenment, and so forth.

Buddhism has a variety of investigation methods. Some examples of Buddhism's investigation methods are like (1) asking questions, (2) offering explanations, (3) testing explanations, (4) mindfulness, (5) wisdom, (6) experience, and so forth. The Buddhist method of investigation is also somewhat looked like the scientific method of investigation or the methods of science.

Buddhism has also a variety of investigation purposes. Some examples of Buddhism's investigation purposes are (1) seeking knowledge, (2) getting enlightenment, (3) overcoming doubt, (4) discovering the truth, (5) removing the defects, (6) removing unwholesome thoughts, (7) reflecting acceptance of Dhamma, (8) getting the cause of a thing, (9) complete destruction of life, and so forth.

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