Skillful Papañca

August 25, 2025

The word “vipancha” has come into our vocabulary. In most practice centers, it’s called a type of thinking where your thoughts go out of control. They run rampant. But when the Buddha talked about it, it was not so much the amount of thinking. It was the kind of thinking. He said it starts with the perceptions of “I am the thinker.” And from there it develops into at least a conflict. Because once you’re the thinker, you become a being. Beings have to feed. They have to feed in the world. And there are other beings in the world that are also feeding. So you come into conflict. And the only people who are totally free from vipancha are arahants. Because it tends to cause trouble, this kind of thinking. The Buddha also talks about ways in which it can be useful. There are passages where he has the monks think about who they’ve been, what they’ve been in previous lifetimes, in a way that gives rise to samvega. There’s one case in particular. A group of thirty monks came to see the Buddha. He thought to himself, “What can I say to get all thirty of them to be arahants in this sitting right here?” So he asked them the question, “Which is greater? The blood you’ve lost having your heads cut off, or the water in the oceans?” And he goes through the different ways in which you might have your head cut off for being an animal that was being killed, or for being a thief. He said in each case, “The blood you’ve shed is more than the water of all the oceans.” So he’s helping the monks think about their personal identity back many, many lifetimes, in a way that got them to let go of that identity, and gained awakening. So you can use vipancha as part of the path. But it’s going to be necessary, a part of the path, to take on an identity that you’re going to meditate. You’re going to follow the practice. And there are going to be parts of your mind that don’t want to follow the practice. It’s like a civil war inside, or a sibling rivalry. A fight where no holds are barred. And so you’re going to need a very strong sense of who you are as a meditator, and what you want. Take on that identity. And use that to fight off all the other parts of you that would want to do something else. The Buddha lists four determinations that function in two ways. One as means to the goal, and another way as high expressions of the goal. As means, he says, don’t neglect discernment. Guard the truth. Be devoted to relinquishment, and train only for calm. Here he’s talking to yourself as an agent. These are the things you do when you don’t neglect discernment. You’re thinking about what would be for my long-term welfare and happiness. Because when the choice comes between really basically simple things, eating too much in the morning, or wanting to meditate, you may have been told as a child that you don’t want to leave any food uneaten. You don’t want to leave scraps left over. But as a meditator, you have to have a different attitude. I remember going to Vadasvakana, and seeing the amount of food that was thrown away every day, every day. At first it seemed shocking. But then the more I thought about it, the more I realized they’re making a statement, an important statement, about the practice. That it’s better to throw food away than it is to weigh yourself down unnecessarily by stuffing it into your stomach. Because the long-term benefits of the meditation are much greater than the long-term benefits of eating. So you remember not to neglect discernment. You identify yourself as someone who doesn’t want to neglect discernment. And then you guard the truth. This can mean many things. But one of them is simply that you have made a vow that you want to do something. And then you stick with it. You’re true to it. Then you’re committed to relinquishment. Anything that gets in the way of your desire for true happiness, long-term welfare and happiness. Part of your identity is you’re willing to let it go. And we have the choice between thinking about things that are exciting and diverting, or things that are calming. So let’s go for the calm. We’ve had entertainment for how many lifetimes? Remember, all the water in the oceans. In another passage, of course, there’s the famous comparison with the tears you’ve shed over the loss of a mother, a father, brother, sister, daughter, son. And the tears are much greater than the waters of the ocean. That’s what comes from seeing where these thoughts will go. This thought looks entertaining. Let’s follow it and see where it goes. And you end up taking on identities that can lead to a lot of suffering. You can ask yourself, as an agent, what do I want to do? And how can I best do it? And take as your identity the decision to not neglect the sermon, to guard the truth, to be devoted to relinquishment, and to train for calm. As for yourself as the consumer who’s going to enjoy the results, the Buddha also talks about the Four Determinations, but in different terms. He talks about the goal, the discernment that lets go of defilements, the truth of nibbana itself, the relinquishment of the defilements, and the calm of nibbana itself. So you’ve got two things that are on the verge of awakening, the discernment and the letting go. And then the awakening itself, truth and calm. You’re going to identify with those goals. Because those are the things that bring true happiness. In the meantime, of course, you’re going to have lots of members of your committee inside, or your little family inside. They’re going to go other ways. You have to ask yourself, where are they leading you? Do you want to identify with those goals? When you take on a particular desire, what kind of person are you becoming? And what kind of person will you become if you, even if you get the desire, get the thing you want? How does that compare to being someone who’s actually found what the Buddha found? So even though there’s a sense of you in there, the agent and the consumer, and it’s going to lead to a bunch, and it’s going to lead to conflict, it’s conflict that’s worth the fight. As we mentioned this morning, the Buddha said that greater than victory over thousands and thousands of people is victory over yourself. So even though eventually we’re aiming at something that’s totally free from conflict, there’s going to be some conflict inside. So you’re going to have to take on a strong identity. Be clear about which desires you want to identify with, because those desires define who you are. And remember, you have the choice. Who do you really want to be?

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