

The Soteriological Significance of Buddhānussati: Path to Liberation or Preliminary Practice

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Abstract

This research analyses the value of Buddhānussati (recollection of the Buddha) in Theravāda Buddhism, particularly its implications for soteriology, determining whether this form of meditation paves the way for attaining liberation (Nibbāna) or merely serves as a preliminary devotion. Although Buddhānussati holds a prominent position among the forty meditation objects (kammaṭṭhāna) in classical Theravāda works, the literature reveals significant divergence among scholars regarding its liberative potential. This study employs a hermeneutic and comparative method to analyze the Pāli canon, especially the Aṅguttara Nikāya and Dīgha Nikāya, as well as the commentaries, particularly Buddhaghosa's Visuddhimagga, to investigate the role of Buddhānussati in soteriology. It explores whether this practice can sufficiently generate the concentration (samādhi) needed for jhānic absorption and the subsequent insight (vipassanā), or if it merely reinforces faith (saddhā) and ethical behaviour (sīla), the means for more advanced practices. The research findings affirm Buddhism's soteriological teachings and the multiple functions of Buddhānussati, as it facilitates access to or 'stalking' concentration (upacāra samādhi) and the 'growth' of wisdom through the contemplation of the Buddha's attributes. The findings affirm that Buddhānussati exhibits multiple soteriological functions beyond the oppositional claim based on practitioner ability, contextual use, and other composite practices. This research enriches modern Buddhist studies by resolving certain theoretical ambiguities and providing guidance for the teaching of meditation in contemporary Theravāda Buddhist communities.

Keywords: Buddhānussati, Soteriological significance, Theravāda Buddhism, Liberation (Nibbāna), Samatha meditation, Vipassanā (insight), Kammaṭṭhāna (meditation objects), Jhāna (meditative absorption), Faith (Saddhā), Pāli Canon, Visuddhimagga, Devotional practice, Buddhist soteriology, Recollection meditation, Path to enlightenment.

Introduction

Within Theravāda Buddhist soteriology, Buddhānussati is the meditative remembrance of the Buddha's attributes. This practice is one of the forty kammaṭṭhāna (meditation objects) designated for systematic mental cultivation. It involves remembering the nine supreme characteristics of the Buddha: Araham, Sammāsambuddho, Vijjācaraṇasampanno, Sugato, Lokavidū, Anuttaro Purisadhammasārathi, Satthā Devamanussānaṃ, Buddhō, and Bhagavā. While the practice is prominent and widespread in Theravāda traditions, fundamental inquiries into its soteriological efficacy remain. Considering the above, the present study seeks to determine whether Buddhānussati is an integral practice in attaining Nibbāna or merely an introductory practice to establish faith (saddhā), build groundwork in ethics (sīla), and prepare practitioners for subsequent insight meditation (vipassanā). This question has profound ramifications, on the one hand for the soteriological

theory of Theravāda and, on the other, for the pragmatic approach to meditative practice in contemporary Buddhist communities.

The classical commentarial tradition, particularly in reference to Buddhaghosa's fifth-century *Visuddhimagga*, notes that *Buddhānussati* generates only *upacāra samādhi* without reaching *appanā samādhi*, thus implying that it remains a preliminary practice. However, certain canonical suttas concede a more complex perspective, at times alluding to even greater liberative possibilities offered by this practice of recall. These sources have been interpreted in diverse ways by modern educators and scholars, leading to a broad spectrum of constituent devotional practices for laypeople and advanced meditation subjects for practising monastics. This research systematically studies the Pāli canonical and commentarial literature to clarify the actual soteriological value of *Buddhānussati*. Focusing on spiritual transformation, the unfolding of concentration and insight, and the integration of all the factors on the path, this study addresses multiple unresolved issues in the literature. It provides a vision of contemporary practice and education in Buddhism.

Research Issue and Importance

Within the Theravāda Buddhist tradition, the role of *Buddhānussati*, the recollection of the Buddha in soteriology, presents an enduring interpretative problem. While the koan literature includes *Buddhānussati* among the forty pieces of Tibetan *cam* meditative coursework, both scholarship and practitioners have yet to agree on whether this practice represents the entirety of the path to *Nibbāna* or should be understood as more devotional groundwork for preliminary techniques.

This ambiguity contributes to concrete difficulties. While Buddhist studies struggle with the contradictions within the texts, which often lead to dead ends, modern meditators have little practical guidance. Fifth-century commentator Buddhaghosa's influential *Visuddhimagga* is a classic example of deepening this issue. He claims that *Buddhānussati* generates only *upacāra samādhi* (access concentration) and does not lead to *appanā samādhi* (full absorption concentration). This apparent technical limitation downplays the practice's liberative potential, diminishing its status soteriologically. More canonically comprehensive. Different suttas mention recollection practices outlining various emancipatory possibilities. This communicates a disconnect between early textual materials and systematic commentaries. This disconnect exposes a critical gap in understanding. How does devotional remembrance divert and/or aid in the process of awakening? What mechanisms transform affective reverence into wisdom and liberate it?

These questions are of greater concern than the academic. Defining the role of devotional practices in contemporary meditation would aid the construction of modern curricula. This influences monastic pedagogy and the role of devotional elements in *vipassanā*-centered training systems. For practitioners and contemporary programs seeking a juxtaposition of contemplative practices, the soteriological dimensions of this practice would also aid clarity. The intertwined roles of devotion and wisdom along the path of enlightenment are evident in the construction of this practice.

Overview of Methodology

This study uses qualitative textual analysis that combines hermeneutical interpretation with comparative doctrinal analysis. The primary data for this research, without bias, are the Pāli canon *Nikāyas*, along with highlighted passages that elucidate the practice of *Buddhānussati* and its soteriological meanings. For secondary texts and interpretation, the literature commentaries (*aṭṭhakathā*) of Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhimagga*, along with other texts of *Visuddhimagga*, are the source. Systematic content analysis was performed to determine, classify, and contrast the statements meditative *Buddhānussati*, the levels of concentration, and liberation. A philological

analysis on the essential Pāli words is to guarantee that the right concept is understood. A comparative analytical framework was provided to assess related interpretations that have existed, culturally and geographically, across other periods and scholarly traditions. A significant portion of the approach draws from and integrates the critical analysis of contemporary academic literature with modern interpretative approaches in Buddhism to substantiate the findings. Such an approach enables the researcher to ascertain the doctrinal context of the collected textual evidence and its historical development, thereby arriving at an integrated understanding of Buddhānussati's soteriological function within the framework of Theravāda Buddhism.

Examination of Buddhānussati within the Theravāda Tradition. Buddhānussati is the first of the forty kammaṭṭhāna meditation subjects listed in Theravāda literature and one of the 10 recollections (dasa ānussati). This practice involves sustained contemplation of the Buddha's nine supreme attributes (nava-guṇa), which are commonly referred to as "Itipi so Bhagavā Arahamaṃ..." This practice is derived from the canonical suttas in which the Buddha taught remembering the Tathāgata's qualities to overcome fear, pay attention, and foster spiritual development. In the history of Theravāda, Buddhānussati has continued to provide a special and dual role. It serves as a devotional practice for lay devotees and as a formal object of meditation that helps develop concentration. The tradition holds this practice in especial regard for the faithful (saddhā-carita) and for the joy (pīti), tranquillity (passaddhi), and mental cleansing that it affords. Buddha-annusati is a practice integrated throughout the monastic curriculum, daily liturgical recitations, and even pilgrimages. Today, it remains a significant and living contemplative practice of Theravāda Buddhists in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos.

Relationship between Samatha and Vipassanā

The integration of samatha, or 'tranquillity meditation', and vipassanā, or 'insight meditation', is a vital area of focus within the Theravāda Buddhist meditation framework. It is essential for understanding the soteriological implications of Buddhānussati. In the early texts, we find two versions of the meditation sequence. From the samatha position, one is called the samatha-yānika approach. In this approach, one uses other samatha techniques, such as Buddhānussati, to focus the mind, and then proceeds to meditation involving contemplation and vipassanā on anicca, dukkha, and anattā. In this sequence, once the user has reached jhānic absorption, they use this stable concentration for vipassanā and contemplate the other jhānic factors of an impermanent, suffering, and non-self reality.

As stated, 'the mind is fully concentrated and the wisdom is properly cultivated... [and] is assisted by the vipassanā', reveals that the samatha is the key essential factor of the mental focus and purification that is needed before one moves to vipassanā. Still, the samatha condition has been said to prepare the mind and does not stop there. It has also been told that not even the highest and most concentrated levels of focus can replace an intended vipassanā, which has also been noted as 'the essential clear thinking'.

Evaluating the significance of this relationship with Buddhānussati raises the question of whether the contemplation of the Buddha's enlightened attributes can mindfully generate liberating wisdom, or whether the practitioner must transition to explicit vipassanā techniques, given that it is classified as a samatha practice. Interpreting the concatenation or dissociation of these two meditation traditions is crucial for determining whether Buddhānussati functions as a preparatory practice or as a complete, self-contained path for soteriological work.

The Function of Faith (Saddhā) in Emancipation

Faith (saddhā) is considered vital on the Theravāda path to liberation because it goes beyond simple belief to a trust grounded in early understanding and evidence. Saddhā is the only spiritual focal point in the five spiritual faculties (pañc'indriya) and the five powers (pañca-balāni), and serves to initiate spiritual involvement, diminish paralyzing doubt (vicikicchā), and aid the practice through the trials. The differentiation between mundane, changeable faith and the 'verified confidence' (avecca-pasāda) at stream-entry highlights the transformation of faith through revelation. Saddhā needs to be carefully balanced with wisdom (paññā); faith in excess breeds gullibility, while wisdom in excess fosters cynical rationalism. The presence of faith-followers (saddhānusārin) and wisdom-followers (dhammānusārin) indicates that faith is of genuine soteriological value. Saddhā is not only preliminary or independently sufficient; it is an essential element that necessitates ongoing cultivation in conjunction with focus and knowledge throughout all stages of enlightenment.

Achievement of Jhāna and Enlightenment

Within Theravāda studies, the relationship between jhāna (meditative absorption) and enlightenment can be controversial. Early texts describe jhāna as states of concentration that deepen and culminate in the four rūpa-jhānas (form absorptions) and four arūpa-jhānas (formless absorptions), each consisting of distinct mental elements, with tranquillity refining progressively. The central question, however, is to ascertain whether jhāna is indispensable in the sequence towards enlightenment, or merely something of value, which is non-mandatory. Some canonical texts indicate that a practitioner of "dry insight" (sukkha-vipassanā) can achieve stream-entry without jhāna. In contrast, others hold that jhānic concentration serves as a basis for liberating wisdom. Other methods exist, and the Visuddhimagga recognises them, yet it still espouses the essentiality of jhāna for the attainment of profound insight. It is worth noting that total jhāna engenders profound mental purification and briefly eliminates hindrances, thereby providing optimal conditions for perceiving reality's essence. However, lacking further vipassanā application on jhāna, i.e. the inquiry of enlightenment's core elements of impermanence, suffering, and non-self, enlightenment will remain unattainable. This understanding is vital for determining whether the concentration gained through Buddhānussati is sufficient for release.

Forty Kammatthāna Objects

The forty kammatthāna constitute a comprehensive categorization of meditation objects within the Theravāda Buddhist tradition, as elaborated in the Visuddhimagga by Buddhaghosa and the relevant commentarial literature. This categorization entails the varying characteristics and the suitability of different meditation objects for different practitioner temperaments or caritas. This comprehensive categorization contains: the ten kasiṇas (which are the totality devices of earth, water, fire, air, the colors blue, yellow, red, white, light, and limited space), the ten asubhas (which are the cemetery contemplations focused on the stages of corpse decomposition), the ten anussatis (which are the recollections of the Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha, virtue, generosity, the deities, death, body, and breathing and peace), the four brahmavihāras (which are the divine abodes of loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity), the four arūpas (which are the formless states), one perception (which is the loathsomeness of food), and one analysis (which is the four elements).

Different kammatthāna types have distinct characteristics which define their adaptability for practitioners based on their individual dispositions: lusty (rāga-carita), hateful (dosa-carita), deluded (moha-carita), faithful (saddhā-carita), clever (buddhi-carita), and discursive (vitakka-carita). Some approaches, for instance, ānāpānasati (mindfulness of breathing), can be recommended for any disposition. Others, such as the subha contemplations, are instrumental in reducing lust. The presence of this particularly sophisticated method truly

attests to the educational precision of the Theravāda tradition and philosophy in the successful practice of meditation, aligning a given practice with a practitioner's psyche. The relative positioning of Buddhānussati in this broad and intricate structure is profound in how one assesses its soteriological value and the conditions under which it ought best to be employed.

Classification of Buddhānussati

Within the Theravāda kammaṭṭhāna classification, Buddhānussati assumes a preeminent position as the foremost recollection (dasa ānussati) and the primary focus for the contemplation of the Triple Gem. The Visuddhimagga classifies it broadly as a samatha (tranquillity) practice that improves one's concentration, while the commentarial tradition points to ongoing disputes concerning its full jhānic potential. Buddhaghosa makes it clear that Buddhānussati practice attains only upacāra samādhi (access concentration), not appanā samādhi (full absorption), due to the discursive nature of the practice, suggesting that contemplation of a range of qualities involves conceptual thought, thus precluding jhāna and its non-conceptual absorption. Given its particularly devotional qualities, Buddhānussati is probably the most universally relevant practice of the dhamma, as it is particularly effective at eliciting joy (pīti), countering fear, enhancing confidence, and promoting conscious control over one's behaviour and is thus relevant for all personality types. Devotional tendencies most strongly associate it with the gentle personality and are therefore most strongly recommended for the Buddhānussati practice. Certain traditions place Buddhānussati alongside samatha and primary wisdom practices, as it is believed that reflecting on the Buddha's qualities could aid dhamma comprehension.

The ambiguity surrounding the classification as exclusively samatha, marginally conducive to vipassanā, or dependent on individual temperament significantly impacts the evaluation of Buddhānussati's soteriological importance. Suppose one were indeed limited to only attaining concentration, without the access of jhāna or insight. In that case, the role of Buddhānussati seems primarily preliminary rather than constitutive of a fully liberative path.

Faith as a Spiritual Faculty

In Buddhist psychology, faith (saddhā) occupies an important position as the cornerstone of the five spiritual faculties (pañc'indriya): faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom. These faculties direct cognitive growth toward the intended goal of liberation. Distinct from peripheral mental qualities, saddhā is an indriya, a governing faculty with command over specific psychological functions. It primarily functions to alleviate vicikicchā (doubt), the stagnating uncertainty and scepticism that undermines sustained cognitive practice.

The technical designation as a faculty differentiates Buddhist faith from simple emotional affect or unquestioning belief. Rather than passively accepting the doctrinal propositions, saddhā actively engages mental faculties and resources toward wholesome growth. It is a dynamic, volitional movement, the 'doing something' kind of faith, as opposed to only 'feeling something.'

The Saṃyutta Nikāya indicates that the five faculties must develop with equanimity, with particular balance needing to be placed on saddhā and its counter faculty paññā (wisdom). Unfettered faith turns into unreasoned fanaticism and tribalism; on the other side, wisdom without sufficient faith breeds sterile intellectualism. Both extremes are antithetical to the process of awakening; most notably, saddhā even develops from a state of confidence. Starting with provisional confidence based on limited exposure (saddhā), this graduated maturation is crucial for understanding the soteriological function of Buddhānussati. The recollection of the qualities of the Buddha serves in part to cultivate and refine this foundational faculty, enabling practitioners to support every

stage of their practice, from initial curiosity to final realisation. The practice then fosters the very confidence needed to overcome the path they aim to pursue.

Integration of Devotion and Wisdom

By incorporating devotion (bhakti) and wisdom (paññā), Theravāda soteriology captures a unique dialectical tension and illustrates the problem of classifying Buddhism as rational and/or devotional. As Theravāda Buddhism emphasises empirical inquiry and contemplative insight, it also emphasises devotional practices, as emotionally engaged rational confidence during the development of knowledge is not a hindrance but an assistive component. Buddhānussati devotion is a clear depiction of this union, in which the practitioner rationally and devotionally reflects on the Buddha's nine excellent qualities, progressively understanding what they reveal about the essence of enlightenment. Reflection and devotion are merely ritualistic until the practitioner internalises the exercise, thereby making it meditative; the participation ritual and conversion, and thus the emotionally focused devotion, are progressively elevated to nourish mental development.

This synthesis illuminates the fact that what is believed to be oppositional emotion and reason, faith and rationality, and devotion and scrutiny is, in fact, the other. In practice, the devotion is the energising, emotionally rallying, confidence-imbuing synchrony that supports an unwavering commitment. At the same time, the wisdom component of reason and rationality provides the cognition, insight, and discernment required. As such, the practice of Buddhānussati is a model practice that illustrates devotion and wisdom in genuine practice, for it goes beyond serving as an initial devotional exercise to incorporate both elements simultaneously.

Evolution of Devotional Practices

Within the Theravāda tradition, the history of devotional practices has changed considerably from the early canonical period and the later commentaries to the present-day context. The activities of devotion recorded in the Pāli Canon appreciate the worth of devotion to the Buddha. They include worshipping stupas, paying respects to the Bodhi tree, and reciting the Teacher's attributes. After the Buddha's death, devotional practices became even more elaborate, including the establishment of relics and the cults associated with them, the organisation of pilgrimages to the four sacred sites, and the adoration of Buddha images, which began in the first century CE.

The commentarial era, and particularly Buddhaghosa's fifth-century codification, systematically incorporated devotional activities into meditation practices through the ten recollections (ānussati) and balanced rational-empirical meditation with faith-enhancing practices. Devotional integration into meditative practices influenced by medieval practices also led to more complex ritual practices, including protective recitations (paritta) and cyclical festivals that incorporated major events in the Buddha's life. Within Theravāda civilizations in Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, and elsewhere, distinct regional adaptations included the development and integration of unique devotional practices rooted in the canon. Today, in temple-centric lay Buddhism, devotional practices focus on merit-making (puñña), while reformist devotional practices concentrate on meditation. In contrast, historically, devotional practices integrated meditation, reflecting the historical development and integration of devotion into meditation, which, in turn, rationalizes and mediates reform initiatives.

The Nine Attributes (Nava Guṇa):

The nine highest attributes (nava-guṇa) of the Buddha are presented mainly in the Aṅguttara Nikāya and are repeated in the formula commencing with “Itipi so Bhagavā...” The nine attributes include: Arahaṃ (Worthy One/Perfect One), Sammāsambuddho (Perfectly Self-Enlightened), Vijjācaraṇasampanno (Accomplished in Knowledge and Conduct), Sugato (Well-Gone/Fortunate One), Lokavidū (Knower of Worlds), Anuttaro Purisadhammasārathi (Unsurpassed Trainer of Persons), Satthā Devamanussānaṃ (Teacher of Gods and Humans), Buddhō (Awakened/Enlightened One), and Bhagavā (Blessed/Fortunate One). The commentarial literature, especially the Visuddhimagga and numerous aṭṭhakathās, offers a comprehensive etymological study and doctrinal elaboration of each term. Buddhaghosa elucidates various interpretative facets for each quality, linking them to particular achievements, fields of knowledge, and perfected virtues (pāramīs). The Manorathapūraṇī and additional commentaries provide different etymologies and contextual interpretations. These texts underscore that practitioners must reflect not only on the phrases themselves but also on their underlying meanings, comprehending how each attribute illustrates the varied nature of total enlightenment. This textual depth offers substantial material for sustained reflective consideration.

Application for Meditation

Meditation practice Buddhānussati involves the detailed examination of the Buddha’s nine attributes at successive levels of thought. Most practitioners begin with the exclamation ‘Itipi so Bhagavā Arahaṃ...’ and start the practice while paying attention. The first stage involves active, sequential attention to the reflective significance of each quality, whereby the meaning ‘Arahaṃ’ is constructed as the one who has purged all defilements. While ‘Sammā’ of ‘Sammāsambuddho’ indicates the passport to full enlightenment, something that was attained without the guidance of any teachers, and so forth.

As the participant’s attention evolves, they will shift from the much-valued analytical contemplation to a more integrated and cohesive mental presence or ‘sati’ of the Buddha as the embodiment of enlightenment. The practice is supposed to lead to ‘passaddhi’ or calm, and ‘ekaggatā’ or at the unified state of highly focused attention that is devotional bliss ‘pīti’. There may be those more advanced in practice who sense the Buddha as the source of emanation of these attributes, or unitive enlightenment, in which the attributes that profoundly suggest ‘the essence’ are to be cultivated.

The Visuddhimagga describes in detail some technical instructions, including creating a calm environment, taking and holding a steady position, beginning with a spoken recitation before moving to silent contemplation, and maintaining a proportional effort, avoiding becoming too tight or too loose. The aim is to develop access concentration (upacāra samādhi) characterised by sustained attention, a reduction in mental scattering, and the presence of preliminary joy and tranquillity. Some practitioners speak of powerful devotional experiences, tears of trust, or profound understandings of the Buddha’s genuine realisation.

Soteriological Consequences

The reflection on the Buddha’s nine virtues and their soteriological implications goes beyond mere devotion and may have a directly liberative impact. Through contemplation on the various aspects of enlightenment, practitioners achieve a twofold result: the strengthening of faith and the acquisition of discernment concerning liberation, which entails the total purification of defilements (Arahaṃ), the possession of ultimate wisdom (Sammāsambuddho), and the having of worthy conduct (Vijjācaraṇasampanno). Such contemplation may serve

to link dedication and insight, for understanding these qualities elucidates the dhamma principles of which they are a part.

Clearly, there are essential questions about direct and indirect soteriological impact. Does Buddhānussati promote Nibbāna due to its concentration and knowledge potential, or does it merely enhance confidence, ease doubt, and encourage engagement in specifically liberative practices like vipassanā? The practice's ability to generate only access concentration, with no full jhāna, suggests limitations, but the development of unwavering confidence and ethical refinement is crucial for establishing conditions for enlightenment. Additionally, reflecting on the attributes of the enlightened may be the first step toward cultivating wisdom. Here, the learner comes to acknowledge the impermanence of the Buddha's historical existence, the no-self in the ego which he transcended, and the cessation of suffering in his liberated state.

Jhāna Potential (Appanā against Upacāra)

According to Buddhaghosa, Buddhānussati merely produces upacāra samādhi (access concentration instead of appanā samādhi (complete jhānic absorption)). This stems from the practice being discursive and, by definition, considering various qualities will entail conceptualising and thoughts associated with jhāna, and especially the absorption jhāna, would be contrary. Access jhāna consists of conditioned, persistent attention, joy and peace, and the somewhat stilling of hindrances, jhāna, and the temporary suppression of hindrances, but not the complete jhāna. Still, some practitioners and educators suggest the possibility of deeper levels of absorption. This claim suggests that people differ in how they understand the practice. This jhānic limitation has profound implications for soteriological considerations. Given that total jhāna has historically been the standard for liberating insight, one wonders whether Buddhānussati, in and of itself, is sufficient for complete enlightenment.

Location inside Purification Phases

The Visuddhimagga organises the road into seven purifications (satta-visuddhis): virtue, mind, view, doubt-transcendence, path-knowledge, knowledge-and-vision, and knowledge-and-vision of liberation. Buddhānussati principally operates within the second stage purification of mind (citta-visuddhi) by cultivating the access focus essential for following insight practices. Its ability to enhance ethical behaviour concurrently facilitates the purification of virtue (sīla-visuddhi), while reflecting on enlightened attributes may aid in the purification of view (ditṭhi-visuddhi) by elucidating correct understanding. Nonetheless, the commentarial tradition regards it as foundational rather than conclusive, indicating that practitioners must advance beyond concentration derived from Buddhānussati to specific vipassanā practices that tackle subsequent phases of purification. This location suggests a preliminary role rather than an independently adequate soteriological function.

Contemporary Theravāda Meditation Traditions

Burmese (Myanmar) Theravāda Buddhism includes the practice of Buddhānussati with varying techniques, pointing to the variety of approaches the country takes to legacy meditation. The Sayādaw Mahāsi lineage, which considers a key methodology of meditation practice to be pure vipassanā (sukkha-vipassanā), tends to view Buddhānussati as a devotional preliminary practice of lower importance than meditation and advocates a rapid transition for practitioners to direct mindfulness of bodily sensations and mental processes. However, the Pa-Auk Sayādaw lineage advocates a systematic approach to cultivating samatha as a precursor to vipassanā,

which includes Buddhānussati as one of the central practices for the meditation concentration, while focusing on ānāpānasati (breath meditation) as the chief means to the attainment of full jhāna.

In the traditional Burmese monastic system, Buddhānussati chanting and meditation were integrated with Pāli scriptures and moral education to complete the devotional practice. Educators of the most excellent repute, like Ledi Sayādaw, used this practice to strengthen faith and moral cultivation among the laity and highlighted its importance to monastics, claiming that rigorous vipassanā should be practised. Most modern meditation centres in Burma, along with other practices, incorporate Buddhānussati and, most importantly, place it at the beginning of retreats to motivate practitioners and instil confidence before they shift to insight practices. This is in recognition of the practice's importance, which also highlights the meditation techniques that Burmese reformist movements classify as directly liberatory.

Perspectives of the Thai Forest Tradition

Traditions of Thai Forest Buddhism from Ajahn Mun and Ajahn Chah emphasise incorporating Buddhānussati, or “recollection of the Buddha,” as a feature of integrated rather than compartmentalised practices. According to the Forest masters, holistic practices are more effective than the “step-by-step” approach, particularly those that intertwine the multiple components of effort, morality, concentration, and wisdom. Ajahn Chah promoted the use of active contemplation of the Buddha's attributes in the “right” direction during adversity to inspire right effort, trigger samvega (spiritual urgency, or urgency of the purpose of life), and maintain direction during adversity, all of which are attributable to Buddhist practice.

The ability of remembrance to heal and enhance determination, as well as cultivate the “Buddha attributes” of compassion, wisdom, and equanimity, are additional reasons the Thai Forest Buddhist community addresses Buddhānussati. Forest teachers suggest remembrance during “spiritual crises,” situations of doubt, and practice situations that trigger fear. Ajahn Maha Boowa insisted that accurate intellectual remembrance, as a technique of practice, exceeds most shallow ideas of remembrance, and that active remembrance, or “remembrance of the Buddha,” forms a deep, engaged, and sentient presence of the enlightened that guides or directs practice.

Moderate certificates go a step further than the descriptions of remembrance in the “systematic traditions,” and instead emphasize that practical Buddhānussati work dynamically within the person's immediate reality. Advanced instruction in Forest Buddhism can promote insight and “Buddhānussati,” literally engaging the practitioner with the reality of the Buddha's enlightenment, suggesting a more emphatic relationship than traditional commentaries do regarding samatha and vipassanā.

Sri Lankan viewpoints

The Theravāda Buddhist tradition in Sri Lanka has a vigorous devotional culture, with Buddhānussati being a staple for both monks and the laity. The Tai Sri Lanka Theravāda lineage, the longest unbroken line of Buddhism in history, proudly features Buddhism's historic devotion as Jayanthi Silva, Silva Jayanthi. The Buddhist devotion history features ornate temple ceremonies, worship of the bodhi tree, and relic worship at landmark sites like the Kandy Tooth Temple shrine. Buddhānussati is integrated into the daily routine of the Sri Lankan Theravāda Buddhist tradition, with the laity reciting the nine attributes daily in church and at home shrines and during morning and evening chanting (pūjā) ceremonies.

Monk scholars like Walpola Rahula and Henepola Gunaratana's acknowledgement of the psychological and mental peace aspects of devotional Buddhānussati is admirable. The peace of mind gained and worries eased inspire confidence for deeper practice. The Kandyan monastic tradition has systematically integrated Buddhānussati into the novice's core training as an integral part of ethical formation. As with other urban meditation centres, Na Uyana Aranya promotes meditation practices such as Buddhānussati for lay Buddhists seeking to integrate spirituality into their daily lives. These practices fulfil the democratising function of providing access to authentic meditation practice, juxtaposed with the strict retreat environment. This reflects the Sri Lankan emphasis on the practicality of Buddhānussati, illustrating its application across diverse contexts and varying practitioner capacities.

Monastic educational programs

In comprehensive training programs, monks' teachers prepare systematic study activities that include Buddhānussati. For example, novice monks (sāmaṇeras) incorporate the nine qualities of the Buddha during the first ordination rites; therefore, devotional practice and daily recitation lay the foundation for further study. Recitation of Pāli texts involves a doctrinal and linguistic analysis of each of the nine qualities, as well as etymological analysis of the texts. This serves both linguistic and doctrinal mastery of the passage. New monks and Vinaya teachers consider Buddhānussati a practice for devotional inspiration and moral uplift; it encourages rejuvenation during periods of moral and inspirational decline. Buddhānussati practices in meditation texts are integrated into the twenty-four other meditation practices, in which meditative techniques are explained to improve concentration.

The pariyatti programs in higher school (monastic) and advanced studies involve lectures and extensive analysis of a teacher's books that explain the philosophy, practical, and soteriological aspects of Buddhānussati. Dhamma desanā (sermon preparation) trains monks to guide the laity practising Buddhānussati in various situations (post-counselling, meditation, during a funeral, and at festive occasions) to help them identify themes of opposition. Integrating such diverse practical applications and instruction reveals the institution's recognition of the diverse roles of Buddhānussati, rather than limiting its use to mere preparatory practice.

Programs at the meditation centre

Different modern Theravāda meditation centres across the globe practice Buddhānussati in various ways, according to lineage traditions and the targeted audience. Most intense vipassanā retreat centres that adhere to the Mahāsi or Goenka traditions regard Buddhānussati as supportive and ancillary, reserved for use in opening and closing ceremonies, evening recitations, or optional devotional breaks, and not in any primary meditation instruction. These programs emphasise direct-use mindfulness techniques, which are perceived as more practical and helpful in developing insight.

In contrast, centres that teach a more organised and systematic progression of samatha and vipassanā meditation integrate prescribed sessions for the teaching of Buddhānussati, in which practitioners are taught the appropriate techniques of that contemplation, develop access concentration, and perform devotional exercises before moving to breath meditation or other objects of concentration. Some centres offer specific retreats on Buddhānussati that take a comprehensive look at this practice over an extended period.

Urban meditation centres, primarily directed towards lay practitioners, focus on the easily accessible psychological benefits of Buddhānussati, such as stress relief, increased self-confidence, and ethical motivation, which are of great appeal to beginners who are put off by the more rigorous demands of vipassanā. Evening

classes and weekend programs often include guided sessions of Buddhānussati for the meditation which accompanies the Dhamma teachings outlining the nine characteristics. This practical adaptation demonstrates an understanding that pampered practitioners need different points of entry, and that, for those of faith, Buddhānussati is a great starting point.

Buddhist academic institutes

These institutions take an intellectual approach, with instruction and research rather than only devotional or meditative practices. Academic Buddhist institutions, such as the Buddhist and Pāli University of Sri Lanka, and the principal associated universities of the International Theravāda Buddhist Missionary University and Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University in Thailand, include Buddhānussati in their curricula for textual studies and programs in comparative religion and contemplative science. Research units approach the study of Buddhānussati from diverse fields, including the historical development of the Pāli language and commentarial devotional practices, the psychological and neuroscience range of meditation, and the phenomenology of devotional practice. Phenomenological accounts of guided meditation are also used. Graduate students' research focuses on the soteriological contextualization of Buddhānussati, the major distinguishing issues across differing canons, and the commentaries included in modernisations.

Buddhānussati as a devotional practice within Theravāda meditation theory, the balance and wisdom of faith, and its legitimation are among the themes of conference presentations. For experiential meditation, students are offered meditation rooms in a few universities. Scholarly engagement constructs new interpretive lines of commentary and advances interdisciplinary research to reinforce the soteriological arguments. This confirms the significance of Buddhānussati within the academic sphere.

Conclusion

The consideration of Buddhānussati's soteriological value shows that the simplistic division of the path of liberation into the preliminary practices fails to capture the diverse significance of this meditation technique within the Theravāda Buddhist canon. Buddhānussati's soteriological functions as sustaining the meditation level of faith (saddhā), assisting in the attainment of upacāra samādhi, where one deepens one's meditation, strengthening one's virtue through inspirational meditation on the perfected, engaging-with, qualities, and perhaps even foundational wisdom through understanding the rational attributes of enlightenment one achieves, sustaining the meditation anchor to the perfected, engaging-with, qualities. Soteriologically, the value of Buddhānussati shifts due to the disposition of the practitioner. It is integrated with other practices, the breadth of active contemplation, and one's spiritual attainment. For faith-based (saddhā-carita) practitioners, the Buddhānussati as a meditation practice is considered sufficient, with ethical practice and insight applied only to a limited extent. For practitioners of a more analytical bent, the practice is more about offering preliminary confidence and the attention needed to embark on a profound mindful awareness (Vipassanā) practice.

This demonstrates how Buddhism understands that different paths to liberation fit different psychological types and developmental trajectories. The continuing importance of Buddhānussati within Theravāda Buddhism, as evidenced in the texts, commentaries, and modern scholarship, speaks to its real soteriological significance and to its avoidance of reductionist treatment. Heuristic research is warranted to understand practitioner Buddhānussati experiences across different contexts, temperaments, and integration frameworks, unlocking its liberative potential and optimising its use in the more unity-oriented aspects of Buddhism.

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