Yoniso Manasikāra Sampadā Sutta
The Discourse on the Accomplishment of Wise Attention
PTS: Yoniso Sutta The Discourse on Being Wise
Theme: The internal condition for the noble eightfold path | S 45.55/5:31
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1 Sutta highlights

The Yoniso Manasikāra Sampadā Sutta is a succinct statement on wise attention spoken by the Buddha to an assembly of monastics. Its structure is identical to that of the Kalyāṇa,miṭṭātā Sutta 1 (S 45.49). Both these suttas are found in the Magga Saṁyutta, the collected discourses on the eightfold path, in the Saṁyutta Nikāya.

The Sutta opens with a parable of the dawn (§§2-3): just as dawn marks the rising of the sun (which brings on a bright day), so too being adept in wise attention is the precondition for the realization of the noble eightfold path leading to awakening (§4).

Like many other sutta definitions of spiritual friendship,2 this sutta, too, mentions the eightfold path in terms of the viveka,nissita (“based on solitude”) formula.3 This formula defines the progressive stages and goal of the spiritual life.

2 Unwise attention and wise attention

2.1 UNWISE ATTENTION. There are two ways in which wrong view arises, that is, through listening to others (parato ghosa) and through unwise attention (ayoniso manasikāra).4 The Aṅguttara Commentary explains parato ghosa in the context of giving rise to wrong view as “hearing the false Dharma before [in the presence of] another” (parassa santikā asaddhamma,savana) (AA 2:157). Not listening to the true Dharma not only prevents the arising of right view, but also prevents wise faith from arising in us, as we do not have any understanding of true reality.

A key term in the Yoniso Manasikāra Sampadā Sutta is “wise attention” (yoniso manasikāra), also translated more broadly as “wise reflection, reasoned attention, methodical consideration” [2.2]. But first, let us examine the negative form, “unwise attention” (ayoniso manasikāra). “Unwise” (ayoniso) is na (“not”) + yoniso (“wise”); this is the common figurative sense.

Yoniso comes from yoni, meaning “the womb, origin (place of birth).” As such, yoniso means “down to its origin or foundation” (PED), and manasikāra (mano, “mind” → manasi (locative) + kara, “doing, acting, working) means technically mentation, or more simply “direct the mind or attention in a certain way.”

Ayoniso manasikāra, as such, means “not directing the attention to the roots of things” or “directing the attention away from the roots of things,” that is, not observing phenomena as they truly are, not noticing that they are impermanent, unsatisfactory and not-self. As a result, wrong view arises, and when this become a habit, wrong view is reinforced so that it remains as a latent tendency (anusaya).5 Let us examine a little more as to how this happens.

“Unwise attention,” according to the Vibhaṅga, is the regarding of what is impermanent as being permanent, what is painful as being pleasurable, what is not self as self, what is foul as beautiful.6 The Majjhima Commentary says these are the four “perversions” (vipallāsa). It explains unwise attention (ayoniso manasikāra) as attention that is unskillful in means (anupāya,manasikāra), attention shown the wrong way (uppatha,manasikāra), that is, by way of the four perversions, namely:

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1 S 45.49/5:29 f = SD 34.11.
2 See Upadţha S (S 45.1) @ SD 34.9 (3).
3 See Viveka,nissita = SD 20.4.
4 Mahā Vedalla S (M 43.13/1:294) = SD 35.1.
5 See Anusaya = SD 31.3 (5).
6 Vbh 936/373; MA 1:64.

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what is impermanent is taken to be permanent (anicce niccan ti);
what is painful is taken to be pleasurable (dukkhe sukhan ti);
what is not self is taken to be self (anattāni attan ti); and
what is impure is taken to be pure (asubhe subhan ti). (MA 1:64)\(^7\)

The (Akusala,mūla) Aṇña,titthiya Sutta (A 3.68) says that the three unwholesome roots (akusala mūla) of lust, hate and delusion arise through unwise attention. Lust arises and grows through unwisely attending to a “beautiful sign,” that is, being captivated by what we perceive as attractive in a thing. Hate arises and grows through unwisely attending to a “repulsive sign,” that is, what we take to be unattractive. And delusion arises and grows through unwise attention itself. In other words, delusion is present when there is lust or hate. Delusion arises and grows because of the four perversions mentioned above.

On a deeper mental level, as explained in the (Āhāra) Kāya Sutta (S 46.2), unwise attention gives rise to the five mental hindrances—sensual desire, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and remorse, and doubt—which prevent us from attaining samadhi, that is, meditative mental focus, or any kind of wholesome attention.\(^8\) Unwise attention, in other words, is based on ignorance, which starts off the dependent arising of mental formations (saṅkhāra), which are karmic activities, and these lead on to a whole mass of suffering,\(^10\) and the prolonging of the samsaric cycle (vaṭṭa) (MA 1:64 f). In short, unwise attention is the root of samsaric existence. Unwise attention is food for a lack of mindfulness and full awareness, which in turn increase ignorance and craving.

2.2 WISE ATTENTION.

2.2.1 Definition. There are two ways in which right view arises, that is, through listening to others (parato ghosa) and through wise attention (yoniso manasi,kāra). The Aṅguttara Commentary explains parato ghosa in the context of giving rise to right view as that of “hearing the true Dharma” (saddhamma,savana) (AA 2:157).

According to the Majjhima Commentary, another’s voice is “the listening to conducive Dharma” (sappāya,dhamma-s,savana), and adds that wise attention is the method of the pratyeka Buddhas and the all-knowing Buddhas, since there is no parato ghosa for them. Parato ghosa is the means of the listeners or holy disciples (sāvaka) (MA 2:346). This interpretation is supported by the Sutta Nipāta Commentary, which says that the “noble listener” (ariya,sāvaka) is one who is characterized by “hearing (the Dharma) before the aryas [noble saints]” (ariyāna  santike sutattā) (SnA 166).

2.2.2 Etymology and usage. Let us now look at how the term yoniso manasikāra is formed so that we have a better understanding of its meaning. “Wise” (yoniso) comes from yoni, meaning “the womb, origin (place of birth).” As such, yoniso means “down to its origin or foundation” (PED), that is to say, going down to the roots of reality.\(^11\) In practice, this refers to what is impure as impure, what is painful as painful, what is not self as not self, and what is foul as foul\(^12\) [2.1], that is, to see things as they really are.

“Attention” (manasi,kāra), according to the Abhidhamma, is the very first stage of the mind’s encounter with an object,\(^13\) and it holds the associated mental factors to the object.\(^14\) As such, it is a promin-
ent factor in two specific classes of consciousness, that is, advertisement (āvajjana) at the five-sense doors and at the mind-door. These two states of consciousness, breaking through into the life continuum (bhavanga), form the first stage of the perceptual process (citta, vīthi).\(^{15}\)

**Yoniso manaskāra** as such means “directing the attention to the roots of things,” that is, observing phenomena as they truly are, as being characterized by impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and not-self. The term frequently appears in the suttas in the sense of “wise attention, wise reflection.” The **Sabbāsava Sutta** (M 2), for example, prescribes wise attention as one of the ways for abandoning mental influxes (āsava). There it is called “wise reflection” (paṭisankhā yonisā), and directed to the proper use of the basic requisites of clothing, food, shelter and medicine, so that “there are no influxes, vexation or fever for him from reflective use.”\(^{16}\)

### 2.2.3 Benefits of wise attention. The Mahā Vedalla Sutta (M 43) says that wise attention fuels mindfulness and full awareness, which, in turn, are the conditions for the arising of right view.\(^{17}\) All this in turn nurture the awakening-factors,\(^{18}\) and in due course fruits in streamwinning.\(^{19}\) In other words, wise attention is conducive to good meditation and the attaining of streamwinning. On a higher level, the **Sekha Sutta** (It 1.2.6) declares that wise attention is of great assistance (S 46.3/5:67-70 = SD 10.15; the Kalyāṇa-mitta Sutta 1 alt tr “limbs of streamwinning”) 1): association with true persons (ie true practitioners, esp M 43) says that wise attention fuels Madhu,piṇḍika S 2

See SD 10.1(8); meaning “flows towards” (ie either “into” or “out” towards the observer). It has been variously tr as cankers, “virtues conducive to growth” (A Pañca Va

In *Pañca Va* (A 5.246) these same 4 qualities are called vitakka, vīthi, cittattāliga, vācāliga: 

These are preliminary practices that lead to the attainment of streamwinning. In *Pañca Va* (A 5.246) these same 4 qualities are called vitakka, vīthi, cittattāliga, vācāliga: \(^{15}\)

\(^{14}\) “Manasi,kāra should be distinguished from vitakka: while the former turns its concomitants towards the object, the latter applies them onto the object. Manasi,kāra is an indispensable cognitive factor present in all states of consciousness; vitakka is a specialized factor which is not indispensable to cognition.” (Abhs:BRS 2.2(7) (Guide). 15 On the perceptual process, see Madhu,piṇḍika S (M 18.15-19/1:11-113) & SD 6.14(4). See also Vism 14.152/466 & The Unconscious = SD 17.8b(5).

\(^{16}\) M 2.13-17/1:10 = SD 30.3 (2.1.3). “Mental influxes,” āsava. The term āsava (lit “cankers”) comes from āsavati, meaning “flows towards” (ie either “into” or “out” towards the observer). It has been variously tr as cankers, taints (“deadly taints,” RD), corruptions, intoxicants, biases, depravity, misery, evil (influence), or simply left untranslated. The Abhidhamma lists 4 kinds of āsava: the influxes of (1) sense-desire (kām āsava), (2) (desire for eternal existence (bhav āsava), (3) wrong views (dīṭṭh āsava), (4) ignorance (avijjāsava) (D 16.2.4, Pm 1.442, 561, Dhs §81096-1100, Vbh §937). These 4 are also known as “floods” (ooghā) and “yokes” (yogā). The list of 3 influxes (omitting the influx of views) \([43]\) is probably older and is found more frequently in the Suttas (D 3:216, 33.1.10-(20); M 1:55, 3:41; A 3.59, 67, 6.63). The destruction of these influxes is equivalent to arhathood. See BDct: āsava. M 43.13/1:294 = SD 35.1.

\(^{17}\) See SD 10.1(8); (Ãhãra) Kâya S (S 46.2/5:64-67); (Bojjha) Sîla S (S 46.3/5:67-70) = SD 10.15; (Ajjhatta) Ânga S (S 46.49/5:101); (Bahiddhã) Ânga S (S 46.50/5:102), Âhãra S (S 46.51/5:102-107) = SD 7.15.

\(^{18}\) See Sàriputta S 2 (S 55.5/5:347 f) = SD 16.5. Here wise attention is one of the limbs for streamwinning (sotapatti-y-angänti, alt tr “limbs of streamwinning”): (1) association with true persons (ie true practitioners, esp saints); (2) hearing the True Teaching; (3) wise attention; (4) practice of the Dharma in accordance with the Dharma (D 33.1.11/13:3227; Pm 2:189 f). These are preliminary practices that lead to the attainment of streamwinning. In *Pañca Va* (A 5.246) these same 4 qualities are called vudhî, dhamma, “virtues conducive to growth” (A 5.246/2:245); cf the 5 factors of noble growth (ariya, vudhî): (Tadah) Uposatha S (A 3.70.8b/1:210) = SD 4.18; Sambhed’okäsa S (A 6.26.8/3:316) = SD 15.7a; Pañca Va’dhî S 1 (A 5.63/3:80); Pañca Va’dhî S 2 (A 5.64/-3:80). See S: B76 n120. Cf (2) sotapannassa angani. In *Pañca Va* Bha’lya S (S 12.41/2:68-70) = SD 3.3(4.2).

\(^{20}\) It 1.2.6/9 f; called Yoniso Manasikārā S by Comy (ItA 1:150).

\(^{21}\) S 45.49/2-3/5:29 f= SD 34.11.
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S 45.55/5:31

The dawn parable

2 Dawn, bhikshus, is the forerunner, the harbinger of sun-rise.\(^{22}\)

Even so, bhikshus, for a monk this is the forerunner, the harbinger of the arising of the noble eightfold path, that is, accomplishment in wise attention.

3 Bhikshus, when a monk is accomplished in this wise attention, it is to be expected that he will cultivate the noble eightfold path, develop the noble eightfold path.

And how, bhikshus, does a monk who is accomplished in this wise attention cultivate the noble eightfold path, develop the noble eightfold path?

The viveka,nissita formula

4 Here, bhikshus,\(^{23}\) a monk cultivates right view based on solitude, on dispassion,\(^{24}\) on cessation,\(^{25}\) maturing in release.

He cultivates right intention based on solitude, on dispassion, on cessation, maturing in release.

He cultivates right speech based on solitude, on dispassion, on cessation, maturing in release.

He cultivates right action based on solitude, on dispassion, on cessation, maturing in release.

He cultivates right livelihood based on solitude, on dispassion, on cessation, maturing in release.

He cultivates right effort based on solitude, on dispassion, on cessation, maturing in release.

He cultivates right mindfulness based on solitude, on dispassion, on cessation, maturing in release.

He cultivates right concentration based on solitude, on dispassion, on cessation, maturing in release.

In this way, Sāriputta, a monk who is accomplished in this wise attention, cultivates the noble eightfold path, develops the noble eightfold path.”

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\(^{22}\) Sāriyassa bhikkhave udayato etaṁ pubbaṅgamaṁ etaṁ pubba, nimittam, yad idaṁ arun' uggama, lit “This, bhikshus, is the forerunner, this is the harbinger to the rising of the sun, namely, the sun.”

\(^{23}\) Idha bhikkhave bhikkhu sammā, dīṭṭhiṁ bhāveti viveka, nissītāṁ virāga, nissītāṁ nirodha, nissītāṁ vossaggā, pariṇāmāṁ. This whole phrase, beginning with “based on solitude”—viveka, nissītāṁ virāga, nissītāṁ nirodha, nissītāṁ vossaggā, pariṇāmāṁ dhamma, vicaya, sambojjhāgam—is called the viveka,nissita formula. See R Gethin, The Buddhist Path to Awakening, 2003:162-168. On the viveka,nissita formula, see Viveka, nissita = SD 20.4; see also “Introduction to the Satipatthāna Suttas” = SD 13.1 §4.2c n.

\(^{24}\) Virāga also “fading away (of lust).”

\(^{25}\) Nirodha, that is, “cessation of suffering.”

\(^{26}\) Vossaggā, also “letting go, relinquishment.” MA says that there are 2 kinds of letting go or relinquishment (of suffering) (vossaggā): “giving up” (pariccāga), ie the abandonment of defilements, and “entering into” (pak-khandana), ie culminating in nirvāṇa. Gethin notes that this phrase is not unique to the 7 bojjhāgā, but is also found in connection with the factors of the noble eightfold path, the indriyā and balā (2001:162 f). This formula shows that that each bojjhāgā is to be developed successively “as dependent on solitude, dispassion [fading away] and cessation” (Gethin 2001:166).