

SD 62.10c**(Chakka) Vitakka Sutta**The (Sixes) Discourse on Thoughts | **A 6.109**or, **(Saṅkappa) Vitakka Sutta** The Discourse on (Intentional) ThoughtsTheme: *Vitakka* as thought, intention and minding

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1 Summary and significance

1.1 SUTTA SUMMARY AND RELATED SUTTAS

1.1.1 Summary of A 6.109

The **(Chakka) Vitakka Sutta** (A 6.109) is about the contents of our thoughts, especially those that are unwholesome—*sensual thought, thought of ill will, and violent thought*—and which need to be abandoned for wholesome ones—thoughts of renunciation, of non-ill will and of non-violence respectively—which are to be cultivated.

1.1.2 Related suttas

1.1.2.1 The next 3 suttas in **the Tika Vagga** [SD 62.10a (1.1.1 f)] are closely related and should be studied together:

A 6.109	(Chakka) Vitakka Sutta	the 3 unwholesome <u>thoughts</u> and their opposites	SD 62.10c
A 6.110	(Chakka) Saññā Sutta	the 3 unwholesome <u>perceptions</u> and their opposites	SD 62.10d
A 6.111	(Chakka) Dhātu Sutta	the 3 unwholesome <u>elements</u> and their opposites	SD 62.10e

1.1.2.2 While **the (Chakka) Vitakka Sutta** (A 6.109) explains the kinds of thoughts and intentions, **the (Chakka) Saññā Sutta** (A 6.110) describes how memory and perception shape and affect our thoughts. **The (Chakka) Dhātu Sutta** (A 6.111) discusses how we construct “something” (ideas and imagination) out of nothing (or nonself).

1.2 SUTTA SIGNIFICANCE

1.2.1 (Chakka) Vitakka Sutta (A 6.109)

1.2.1.1 **The (Chakka) Vitakka Sutta**, the (sixes) discourse on thoughts, is a brief introduction for the laity and beginners on the practical nature of **thoughts**. The teaching is succinct; it basically only says: Thoughts that are sensual, ill willed or violent should be abandoned. In their place, wholesome thoughts, that is, those of renunciation, non-ill will and non-violence, are to be cultivated. This is what the Buddha teaches.

It is now up to an experienced teacher to compassionately instruct and inspire us in the details of these vital teachings as reflected in **the (Chakka) Vitakka Sutta**. Or, if we are inclined and up to it, we may search the suttas as our spiritual practice or exercise. One helpful method is to study a few good writings on the sutta or the subject by practising Buddhist renunciants, and perhaps have regular sutta readings or study fellowship gatherings (ideally with a brief guided meditation).

1.2.1.2 In this sutta study, we will first briefly relate what **vitakka** basically means and how we can go on to study or teach **the (Chakka) Vitakka Sutta** itself. The brief notes in Section (1) are just for that: a quick preparation for self-study into the Sutta (which is very brief anyway). Once you have done this, you will probably want to go into more detail into the nature of **vitakka** that is only briefly stated in the Sutta by way of the 3 limbs of right thought: *the thought of renunciation, the thought of non-ill will, and the thought of non-violence*.

1.2.2 We are thinking beings

1.2.2.0 This section [§1.2.2] serves as a brief introduction into the meaning and applications of **vitakka** that you need to know for a more satisfactory study of **the (Chakka) Vitakka Sutta** (A 6.109). You should have read this section, too, before going into your 2nd and more detailed study of the Sutta. While in **the 1st self-study** you are advised to simply read through the Sutta *as it is* just once. Then, on another occasion (whether on the same day or another), for **the 2nd self-study**, you may go on to read the Sutta more in-depth with the footnotes and cross-references.

Since the **A 6.109** sutta translation itself has no footnotes, you may go on to read the rest of this section [§1] (again if you like), and then go on to study §2.

1.2.2.1 The **Dhammapada** opens with these 2 key verses germane to this sutta study:

<i>mano,pubbaṇ,gamā dhammā</i>	The mind precedes (unwholesome) states;	
<i>mano,seṭṭhā mano,mayā</i>	the mind is supreme; mind-made are they:	
<i>manasā ce paduṭṭhena</i>	when, with a defiled mind,	
<i>bhāsati vā karoti vā</i>	one speaks or acts,	
<i>tato naṃ dukkham anveti</i>	suffering thus follows one	
<i>cakkaṃ va vahaṭo padaṃ</i>	like a wheel that dogs a draught-ox's foot.	(Dh 1)
<i>mano,pubb'aṅgamā dhammā</i>	The mind precedes (wholesome) states;	
<i>mano,seṭṭhā mano,mayā</i>	the mind is supreme; mind-made are they:	
<i>manasā ce pasannena</i>	when, with a pure mind,	
<i>bhasati vā karoti vā</i>	one speaks or acts,	
<i>tato naṃ sukham anveti</i>	happiness thus follows one	
<i>chāyā va anāpayinī</i>	like a shadow that leaves not.	(Dh 2)

You or the sutta class may like to discuss how these 2 Dh verses are related to the sutta teachings of **A 6.109**.

1.2.2.2 Due to the centrality of **the mind** in early Buddhism, we will notice that the suttas use a number of well known words—*citta*, *mano*, *viññāṇa*, *saññā*—and **vitakka**—to refer to the mind. In other words, the functions of all these terms overlap in important ways and yet each term also has its own special, even unique, functions in certain contexts.¹

In the case of **the (Chakka) Vitakka Sutta** (A 6.109), **vitakka** is used in the sense of “intention” (*cetanā*), that is, as:

The 3 bad roots (akusala mūla)			
(1) sensual thought	<i>kāma,vitakka</i>	<i>lobha</i> (greed)	[1.2.2.3]
(2) thought of ill will	<i>vyāpādā,vitakka</i>	<i>dosa</i> (hatred)	[1.2.2.4]
(3) violent thought	<i>vihiṃsa,vitakka</i>	<i>moha</i> (delusion)	[1.2.2.5]

1.2.2.3 As an “unwholesome root” (*akusala mūla*), greed (*lobha*) refers to any kind of desire that is sense-based, and is thus a synonym of “sensual thought” (*kāma,vitakka*). **A sensual thought** is any kind of thought rooted in lust arising from a sense-experience such as sight, sound, smell, taste, or touch, or a

¹ In some contexts, *citta* = thought, *mano* = mind, and *viññāṇa* = consciousness. See SD 56.4 (3.4.2.5); SD 60.1d (1.2.5.5). On *saññā* as consciousness, see SD 17.4 (7.1.7).

thought of any of these. In other words, one is stimulated by merely *a thought* of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching or thinking about someone or something that arouses **lust** for more of that experience, and such a thought often arises with a negative effect. Psychologically, it is a **fixation** to a sense-experience or the mere thought of such an experience. In simple terms, “fixation” is seeing *something* in what is merely passing.

Lust thus works to feed itself; it makes us want to have what we *see, hear, smell, taste, touch or think*—even to create, prolong, procreate, proliferate them. This is the samsaric nature of things: lust feeds on itself. We call it **sexuality**; hence, the Buddha declares that sexual pleasures are “time-consuming”; they hold us down in time and prolongs itself as samsara, an endless cycle of needs and wants, rooted in craving and ignorance.²

The quest for the gratification of sexual desire generates lust (*rāga*), greed (*lobha*) and covetousness (*abhijjhā*). Sexuality invariably entails sense-desire or sensual desire (*taṇhā*), and, in this lustful quest, whatever that is perceived as opposing it would generate hate (*dosa*), ill will (*vyāpāda*) or aversion (*paṭigha*). All these defilements feed our existence (*bhava*), becoming this and that, and preventing us from seeing beyond the delusion (*moha*) that makes it all appear worthwhile. (SD 21.4)

An extreme case of such a **sensual thought** is when we lust after someone or something. This *something* may take the form of a person, persons, power, money, fame, and so on. We are so consumed by the idea of *this* person or *that* thing that we are often driven to have it no matter what. Very often the moral restraining walls and psychological checks have broken down or are simply absent. We are, as it were, fooled by the very idea of it, as immortalized in a popular song in a well-known 1938 Broadway musical, thus, much more darkly real than all the delight that the song gives us:³

Falling in love with love	Is falling for make believe.
Falling in love with love	Is playing the fool.

1.2.2.4 The main **danger** or at least disadvantage with such a lustful state is that it drives us to collect, even to project, information or suggestion about our desired or admired object. When one feels such a deceptive or virtually real attitude in another—like a leader promising some great political or religious dream, or great wealth, power or gain, to others in dire need of such a thing (even if it is just an idea of it)—then that leader will have great, even unlimited, power over us. We become mere followers and blind believers—slaves and tools—of that leader. This can only end as a tragic and destructive relationship.

Such a powerful leader is also a supreme con-artist who easily and often exploits others for his benefit. His tools are the common desire or common hatred or common delusion or a common fear of others. Due to the subtleties of religious sentiments, we are less likely to notice the effects of the power of such religious leaders on us as followers until the loss or damage is massive, public, and too late, which the burden posterity is likely to continue to painfully bear.

More common are such leaders’ and opportunists’ con-jobs of exploiting the dreams and desperation of those desiring to find some wealth or suitable job. In 2023, in affluent **Singapore**, for example,

² S 1.20/1:8-12, SD 21.4.

³ *The Boys From Syracuse* was a musical based on Shakespeare’s *The Comedy of Errors*, as adapted by librettist George Abbot. (Shakespeare’s play was itself loosely based on a Roman play, *The Menaechmi* or *Twin Brothers*, by Plautus.) Aching with loneliness due to the absence of her husband, Antipholus of Ephesus, Adriana ruefully reflects on her love life. “Falling in love with love” was first sung by Muriel Angelus in the 1938 Broadway premiere of *The Boys from Syracuse*, and the song became an American standard. Notable recordings incl renditions by Helen Merrill, Dinah Shore, Vic Damone, Anita O’Day, Frank Sinatra, Sammy Davis Jr, Sarah Vaughan, Andy Williams, The Supremes and Jessye Norman. In 1997, Bernadette Peters, playing Cinderella’s stepmother, sang the song in ABC television’s broadcast of *Rodgers & Hammerstein’s Cinderella*.

there were reported 46,563 cases of scams, the highest number of cases since police started tracking them in 2016. The 2023 figure is up 46.8 per cent from the 31,728 cases in 2022. Scam victims in Singapore lost S\$660.7 million in 2022, and S\$651.8 million in 2023. The most common ruse that victims fell prey to was job scams, with 9,914 cases reported and at least S\$135.7 million lost in total.⁴

The riskiest aspect of **lust** (desire for things and power, and the drive of one's views) is clearly the delusion of finding easy answers to our *personal* problems *outside* of our own efforts. The key teaching to remember and apply here is that of self-effort and self-reliance. True success and happiness come from diligence and wisdom.⁵

1.2.2.5 Lust, the deepest of the unwholesome roots, always works hand in hand with **hatred** and **delusion**. We earlier mentioned that in sensual lust, we are always driven or drowned in an idea [1.2.2.3] of someone or something. To be “**in love with an idea**” here often means that one falls in love with only a part of a person, usually the looks, or perhaps, a sense of “something” (a tangible idea), even a physical part of the human body⁶ or the body as a whole, or something unseen (the fixation on an idea).

We are often driven by the idea that, despite all the impermanence, changes, etc, there must be “something” out there. We often try to seek out what this *something* is or can be: it usually comes by way of some form of *fixed* idea of someone, something *abiding*, an *immortal* soul, or an *eternal* God-idea perhaps. The more intelligent and desperate we are, the more sophisticated such an “idea” may become. Cults and religions are rooted in such an idea and fed by this desperation.

1.2.2.6 It is perhaps in this connection that **Voltaire** (1694-1778) thought, “If God did not exist, it is necessary to invent him.” (*Si Dieu n’existait pas, il faudrait l’inventer.*)⁷ He is said to have believed in the God-idea but his quip here seems more profound than his belief. I would also like to reflect that the practical reason why “it is necessary to invent him [the God-idea]” is better understood when we mindfully reflect on the Buddha’s of **nonself** (*anattā*).

The teaching on nonself essentially says that there is nothing—animate or inanimate—that is an abiding entity. Existence is change; whatever exists must change. Thus, to imagine some kind of eternal entity, such as a creator or God, can never be real, but only a matter of belief and faith. While a God-believer may argue that we should “believe that we may understand,” suggesting that we should accept such dogmas and fiats with neither reason nor question. It is “true” when we believe it!⁸

However, in this case, what is “true” depends on the power of religious or political authority who defines and enforces what should be “true” in its theology or ideology. What actually liberates us and keeps us truly mentally healthy and free is **reality** itself. A desert mirage is true (it can be seen under certain conditions), but there is *really* nothing there!

Believing in such unrealities often leads to religious absurdities—and political atrocities. Religion, as we well know—but we often choose not to *believe*—has unflinchingly proven throughout history and will continue to prove that the invention of such an idea (God and related ideas) and its application have not been helpful to humanity at all.

⁴ <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/3066-victims-lose-over-45m-in-job-scams-between-oct-2023-and-jan-2024>. 12 Dec 2024.

⁵ In Singapore, where the “power distance index” [SD 3.14 (8.4)] is very high, con-workers often pose as figures of power, such as the police, and ask their victims (1) to transfer money; (2) to disclose bank log-in details; (3) install mobile apps from unofficial app stores; and (4) transfer the call to “the police.” Govt officials will never do any of these things over a phone-call. (Singapore Police Force; National Crime Prevention Council, 2025).

⁶ Such as chests and torsos as in the case of the serial killer, Jeffrey Dahmer (1960-94). (B Masters, *The Shrine of Jeffrey Dahmer*, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1993:51 f).

⁷ https://expositions.nlr.ru/eng/ex_rare/Voltaire_religion/.

⁸ SD 49.2 (3.5.2); SD 56.18 (1.2.1.2); SD 62/10f (2.1.2); SD 62.1 (2.4.1.5).

We may tell stories of divine acts and adventures of powerful and strange gods, and these may teach us how to live more humanely with one another. But when such stories are taken seriously and used as the source of one's own political or psychological power—and others are forced to accept one's ideas, or will be exterminated otherwise—then, we will be repeating centuries of religious wars and conflicts, and now with more sophisticated weapons and methods of destruction and suffering.

Such ideas rooted in lust and ignorance (such as the God-idea) are profoundly dangerous when we fail to understand and accept them as being merely ideas. It means that we do not have any proper understanding of how our minds work; yet we want to control other minds with such an idea. **True godliness** or divinity begins with love and respect for other bodies and minds, and the conquest of our own self. (Dh 104 f)

2 Vitakka: senses and significance

2.1 VITAKKA, AN EARLY BUDDHIST TERM

2.1.1 Definition of vitakka

2.1.1.1 Vitakka—like *manasikāra*, *saṅkappa*, *cintā*, *cetanā*, *maññanā*—means “thought.” These words thus have overlapping senses meaning “thought.”⁹ *Vi-takka* is derived from the prefix *vi-* (meaning “asunder, various, expansion” + *takka* from *√TARK*, “to think”; that is, the kind of thinking that seeks, analyzes and proliferates. Hence, of such “thought” words in Pali, *vitakka* has apparently the broadest application for thinking or minding in ordinary usage [below], in ethical usage [2.2] and in meditative usage [2.8].

The earliest Abhidhamma text, **the Vibhaṅga**, gives a similar definition of ***vitakka*** in the context of *jhāna*: *takko vitakko saṅkappo appanā vyappanā cetaso abhiniropanā sammā, saṅkappo*. The Vibhaṅga also gives a similar definition of ***vicāra***: *cāro vicāro anuvicāro upavicāro cittassa anusandhanatā anupekkhanatā*. Notice the components of last terms here: *anu* “sustained”; *sandhi* (literally, “linking,” that is, “application”) of the mind, and from *√IKKH*, “to see,” we get “sustained” (equanimous) observation.

2.1.1.2 In its narrow sense, it is usually used for “distracted thought,” as in **the Vitakka, saṅṭhāna Sutta** (M 20) [2.7.1]; yet, it can also apply to “thoughts of a great man” (*mahā, purisa, vitakka*), as in **the (Aṭṭhaka) Anuruddha Sutta** (A 8.30) [2.2.1.3].

In the suttas, the word ***takka*** often has a negative sense, representing the kind of theoretical speculation and sophistry that can lead to wrong conclusions and false views, as elaborately described, for example, in the “62 wrong views” of **the Brahmajāla Sutta** (D 1).¹⁰ Hence, *takka*¹¹ is seen as one of several common but unreliable sources of knowledge—that is, how we individually interpret “the all” (*sabba*) as defined in **the Sabba Sutta** (S 35.23) as our 6 sense-faculties and their objects. It is how we psychologically see experience and socially construct knowledge.

The Kesa,puttiya Sutta (A 3.65) records the Buddha as reminding us that true knowledge is not based in any of the 10 doubtful sources, that is, tradition, lineage, hearsay, scripture, pure reason,

⁹ *Manasi, kāra* basically means “paying attention to”; *saṅkappa*, usu means “thought,” but as the name of the 2nd path-limb, it means “intention,” which is *cetanā*; *cintā* refers to the thinking-process itself and is thus used as an adj, as in *cintā, maya paññā*, “mind-made [mind-based] wisdom.” *Maññanā* (vb *maññati*) tends to refer to what we do with thinking, such as imagining and conceptualizing. Hence, they are all words relating to thinking. See DEB svv.

¹⁰ D 1,34/1:16 (SD 25.2).

¹¹ *Takka* has evolved in Malay as *teka*, “to guess”; and *teka-teki* is “a riddle (usu a game).”

inference, reasoned thought, or because one is convinced by something. When one knows for oneself that an act of body, speech or mind is blamable (that is, rooted in greed, hatred or delusion), one should reject it. Only when such experience or knowing is wholesome (not rooted in greed, hatred or delusion), should one accept it.¹²

In short, our knowing and thinking should be both *good* (morally blameless) and *wholesome* (promoting mental and spiritual development).

2.1.1.3 The term ***vitakka*** in itself, however, does not necessarily mean anything negative. As a rule, it is the context and how we read it or act on it (or not) that decides whether a particular instance of *vitakka* is negative or positive, especially for us. Then, we carefully observe whether it is the same situation for others, too, under similar circumstances.

Take the case of killing; it is wrong because everyone, in their right mind, loves *life*.

Stealing is wrong because everyone seeks *what* brings them happiness and taking *that* away deprives them of *happiness*.

Sexual misconduct is wrong because the perpetrator violates another, thus disrespecting his or her *freedom* to say no.

Lying is immoral because it rejects or disrespects *truth*, which is the basis for all these **values** underpinning moral conduct and common good.

Drunkenness is morally wrong mainly because we are clouding up our mind, depriving it of mindfulness and clear awareness, so that we are likely to break any of the other precepts.

We will now look at the ethical role and dimension of *vitakka*.

2.2 THE ETHICAL DIMENSION OF VITAKKA

2.2.1 Two kinds of thoughts

2.2.1.1 The Dvedhā, vitakka Sutta (M 19) gives us some insight into the early ethical dimension of *vitakka* as a direct outcome of the Buddha's pre-awakening experiences. The Sutta describes how the bodhisattva, in his quest for awakening, formed a clear distinction between unwholesome thoughts related to *sensuality, ill will or harming*, and wholesome thoughts related to *renunciation, non-ill will or harmlessness* (hence, the title of the Sutta, "the 2 forms of thoughts").¹³

The rationale behind this distinction is that the thoughts related to *sensuality, ill-will and harming* will invariably lead to affliction for oneself and for others, and to loss of wisdom. In short, such *vitakka* leads us away from the path and from nirvana. Based on this clear distinction, the bodhisattva made a determined effort to overcome unwholesome thoughts, and cultivate wholesome thoughts, as part of his progress to awakening.

2.2.1.2 The Sacca Vibhaṅga Sutta (M141) makes the same distinction that we should cultivate **intentions** of *renunciation, of non ill-will and of harmlessness* as the 2nd limb of the noble eightfold path.¹⁴ This is, in fact, the fundamental role of the ethical dimension of *vitakka* as thought and intention so that we progress on the path or grow as practising Buddhists. [2.6]

The Mahā Sudassana Sutta (D 17) is a remarkable meditation myth regarding the proper attitude towards such thoughts as exemplified by king Mahā Sudassana, who before retiring for meditation tells himself:

¹² A 3.65/3:188-193 (SD 35.4a).

¹³ M 19,3-6/1:114 f (SD 61.1).

¹⁴ See M 141,25/3:251 (SD 11.11).

“Stop, sensual thoughts! Stop, hateful thoughts! Stop, violent thoughts!
 Only thus far, sensual thoughts! Only thus far, hateful thoughts! Only thus far, violent thoughts!”¹⁵
Tiṭṭha kāma,vitakka, tiṭṭha vyāpāda,vitakka, tiṭṭha vihiṃsā,vitakka. Ettāvatā kāma,vitakka,
ettāvatā vyāpāda,vitakka, ettāvatā, vihiṃsā,vitakkā ti. (D 17,2.2/2:186), SD 36.12

These 3 negative thoughts—of *sensual lust, hatred and violence*—constitute “wrong intention” (*micchā-saṅkappa*).¹⁶ Mahā Sudassana is here applying right intention to guard his meditation and mind.¹⁷

2.2.2 Vitakka as reflection

2.2.2.1 The early Buddhist analysis of thought does, however, not exhaust itself in treating only unwholesome thoughts. In fact, the whole purpose of the suttas is to encourage the cultivation of wholesome thought, intention—and **reflection**. The teachings given by the Buddha and his early disciples, all given orally, need to be borne in mind and *reflected* upon in order to lead to progress on the path. According to **the Vimutt’āyatana Sutta** (A 5.26), such reflection constitutes one out of 5 bases of liberation (*vimutt’āyatana*). Here liberation of the mind takes place based on having reflected on the teachings one has heard (*yathā,sutaṃ yathā,pariyattaṃ dhammaṃ cetasā anuvitakketi anuvicarati*).¹⁸ Through reflecting in this way, zest and joy arise in the mind, which lead to tranquillity and concentration as a basis for breaking through to liberating insight.

2.2.2.2 The (Aṭṭhaka) Anuruddha Sutta (A 8.30) relates the elder Anuruddha as reflecting on 7 thoughts that conduce to mental freedom. The Buddha appears to him and teaches him the 8th thought. These came to be called **the 8 thoughts of a great man** (*mahā,purisa,vitakka*). According to these 8 thoughts, the Buddha’s teaching is *for one of few desires, one who is content, who loves solitude, who exerts himself, who is mindful, who is in samadhi, who is wise, and, above all, for one who does not delight in mental proliferation* (*nippapañc’ārāma*).¹⁹

The term **ni-papañc-ārāma** here means “freedom from all thoughts,” and has the same sense as *atakk’āvacara*, “inaccessible to thought,” that is, beyond the range of thought. Before examining *atakk’āvacara*, let us first find out how *vitakka* arises.

2.3 HOW VITAKKA ARISES

2.3.1 As we think, so we are

2.3.1.1 According to the thought-analysis made in **the Dvedhā,vitakka Sutta** (M 19) [2.2.1.1], whatever we frequently think about will habituate itself into a mental habit (*yañ ñad eva ... bahulaṃ anuvitakketi anuvicāreti, tathā,tathā nati hoti cetaso*).²⁰ Thus, explains the Sutta, when we frequently think thoughts of sensuality or of ill will or of violence, it will only strengthen the mental habit for arousing such thoughts. As we think so we are.

¹⁵ On the 3 negative thoughts as “wrong intention” (*micchā,sāṅkappa*), see **Mahā Cattārisaka S** (M 117,11/3:72), SD 6.10. On the context of right intention in the 3 trainings, see **Sīla samādhi paññā**, SD 21.6 (3.2.1).

¹⁶ See **Mahā Cattārisaka S** (M 117,11/3:72), SD 6.10.

¹⁷ M 117,2.8 (SD 6.10), On the context of right intention in the 3 trainings, see **Sīla samādhi paññā**, SD 21.6 (3.2.1).

¹⁸ A 5.26,5.4/3:23 (SD 21.5).

¹⁹ A 8.30/4:229 (SD 19.5).

²⁰ M 19,6/1:115 (SD 61.1).

Such a vicious mental chain of thoughts, if not abandoned, will cut deeper into us as unwholesome inclinations, inciting more of such thoughts. We can only end this vicious cycle, even if for the moment, in courageously being aware of what is taking place; followed by a determined effort to abandon these unwholesome thoughts, such as using the strategies laid out in **the Vitakka,saṇṭhāna Sutta** (M 20, SD 1,6) [2.6.1.2].

2.3.1.2 The development of insight into the nature of our thoughts and thinking habits requires us in particular to be aware of our thoughts as they arise, as they remain for a brief while, and as they pass away (*viditā vitakkā uppajjanti, viditā upaṭṭhahanti, viditā abbhataṭṭhaṃ gacchanti*) as stated in **the (Catukka) Samādhī Sutta** (A 4.41).²¹ How does this happen? The Commentary explains it thus:

How are feelings known as they arise, etc?

Here, a monk comprehends the base [the sense-faculty] (*vatthu*) and the object (*ārammaṇa*). By comprehending the base and the object, he knows: “Thus those feelings have arisen; thus they stand; thus they cease.”

The same method applies to perceptions ... and to thoughts (AA 3:85,3-15)

When we practise watching the 3 phases of experiential events in this way, say **the (Sattaka) Paṭisambhidā Suttas 1 and 2** (A 7.38+39), we develop mindfulness and clear awareness (*sati,sampajañña*), and this constitutes one of the requirements for the analytical knowledges (*paṭisambhidā*).²² The 4 analytic knowledges (*paṭisambhidā*) are as follows,

- | | |
|---|--------------------------------|
| (1) the analytic knowledge of meanings, | <i>attha,paṭisambhidā;</i> |
| (2) the analytic knowledge of teachings [truths], | <i>dhamma,paṭisambhidā;</i> |
| (3) the analytic knowledge of language, and | <i>nirutti,paṭisambhidā;</i> |
| (4) the analytic knowledge of ready wit, | <i>paṭibhāṇa,paṭisambhidā.</i> |

These are the qualities of ideal Dharma teachers, that is, those who:

- (1) understand the connotative interpretations of the teachings,
- (2) understand the denotative meanings of the teachings,
- (3) have useful knowledge of languages, and
- (4) have analytic perspicacity (including a subtle sense of humour).²³

Owing to the teaching skill that Mahā Koṭṭhita shows, as recorded in **the Mahā Vedalla Sutta** (M 43), the Buddha declares him as the foremost among those monks with analytic insights (*paṭisambhida-p,patta*).²⁴

2.3.2 The role of perception

2.3.2.1 In regard to the arising of unwholesome thoughts, an important factor is **perception** (*saññā*). According to the analysis given in **the Samaṇa,maṇḍika Sutta** (M 78), unwholesome thoughts and intentions arise from perception (*saññā*) *of sense-desire, of ill will and of violence*.²⁵ That is, a central root of unwholesome thought-processes is in the way that we perceive (recall or identify with) an experience.

²¹ A 4.41/2:45 (SD 24.1).

²² A 7.38+39/4:33.

²³ SD 28.4 (4); SD 41.6 (2.2); SD 58.1 (5.4.2.13). As special qualities of arhats, SD 56.15 (1.2.1.5).

²⁴ M 43/1:292-298 (SD 30.2); A 1.218/1:24; Tha 2; ThaA 1:31f; AA i.159; Ap 534/479 f; Avadāna 2.195.

²⁵ M 78,12(2)/2:27 (SD 18.9).

The Madhu,piṇḍika Sutta (M 18) records the Buddha as explaining to an arrogant old brahmin that based on a particular type of perception, *vitakka* arises: what we perceive we *think* about it.²⁶ What we think about then has the propensity of exploding into more thoughts (*papañca*) or mental proliferation or a chain-reaction of countless thoughts. We are then lost in thoughts, as the Buddha explains to Sakra, the lord of the devas in **the Sakka,pañha Sutta** (D 21).²⁷

2.3.2.2 As the **Madhu,piṇḍika Sutta** (M 18) clarifies, delight in mental proliferations and related perceptions is responsible for quarrels and litigations, for the taking up of rods and swords, as well as for malicious words and false speech.²⁸ Thus when monks quarrel amongst themselves, the conclusion that can be drawn is that they have not developed the 3 wholesome types of thoughts, and instead have been dwelling frequently in thoughts related to *sensuality, ill-will and harming*, as stated in **the Bhaṇḍana Sutta** (A 3.124).²⁹ Hence, in **the (Catukka) Cara Sutta** (A 4.11), the Buddha states that whether we are walking, standing, sitting or lying down, we should abandon all unwholesome thoughts.³⁰

2.3.2.3 It requires great determination to keep unwholesome thoughts out of the mind. This is due to the way thoughts arise and how they drive our actions and speech; only too often they occur *without* any conscious deliberation. We speak of “I” did this, or of “my” thoughts and ideas, but on careful consideration, they turn out to be beyond *our* control. This is often seen in anyone trying to meditate, where one in no time will realize how difficult it is to avoid getting lost in all kinds of thoughts, daydreams and memories! Our minds are taken for a wild ride despite our earlier determination to focus on a particular meditation object.

To remedy this situation, the arising of *vitakka* needs to persistently be brought under conscious control through gradual taming of the mind during meditation. Hence, says **the Vitakka,saṅṭhāna Sutta** (M 20), it would be truly remarkable when a meditator can claim that he has such control over his mind that he will only think the thoughts he really wants to think.³¹ According to **the Kevaḍḍha Sutta** (D 11), to teach others how to properly direct or correct the mind’s thinking is indeed to be regarded as **a miracle of instruction** (*anusāsani,pāṭihāriya*), a wonder of education.³²

2.4 VITAKKA AND PAPAÑCA

2.4.1 Thought explosion

2.4.1.1 We have noted the meaning of *vitakka* as “thinking,” and its related word, *vicāra*, “pondering.” Functioning together, we have the dvandva, *vitakka,vicāra*, “thinking and pondering,” referring to a sustained activity of thinking that arises in our daily lives [2.2.1.3]. This is the kind of mental process that we go through as we engage with the world on *a generally manageable level*, even as a positive communication or engagement, so to speak.

2.4.1.2 On a deeper, often pathological level, we tend to project much more of our unconscious conditionings onto our physical sensings—what we see, hear, smell, taste and touch—under the main influence of the way we think. How we think is projected *onto* our world of senses: the “all” (*sabba*) that

²⁶ M 18,16/1:112 (SD 6.14).

²⁷ D 21,2.2/2:277 (SD 54.8).

²⁸ M 18,6/1:109 (SD 6.14).

²⁹ A 3.124/1:275.

³⁰ **(Catukka) Cara S** (A 4.11), SD 57.34; also called **(Iti) Cara S** (It 110/4.1.11/115), SD 57.35.

³¹ M 20,8/1:121 (SD 1.6).

³² D 11,8/1:214 (SD 1.7).

is our virtually real existence: the world that we create and live in—this is more real to us than the world outside.³³

2.4.1.3 In the (Catukka) Koṭṭhita Sutta (A 4.174), Sāriputta defines this virtual world of our 6 senses, on account of craving, views and conceit, as follows:

So far as the range of **the 6 bases for contact** extends, that far extends the range of proliferation.³⁴

So far as the range of **proliferation** extends, that far extends the range of the 6 bases for contact.

(A 4.174/2:162 f), SD 57.36

“The bases of contact” (*phass’āyatana*) refers to the mental roots of our sense-experiences and our thoughts: they constitute our virtual world, which is more real to us than the world outside. Our virtual world extends as far as the reach of our senses, spatially or mentally. Our world is totally thought-created: it is created by, with and for our thought. This is called mental proliferation (*papañca*). [2.3.2.1 f, 2.5.1.2]

2.5 VITAKKA AS THOUGHT AND INTENTION

2.5.1 Vitakka and saṅkappa

2.5.1.1 Psychologically, **vitakka** and **saṅkappa** are synonyms: they both share the same senses of “thinking, thought, intention.”³⁵ As a rule, all our thoughts or intentions, whether we are conscious of them or not, are either unwholesome or wholesome, mostly the former. Our unconscious conditioning, called the **latent tendencies** (*anusaya*)—basically, lust, aversion and ignorance—work as *greed, hate and delusion* on the preconscious³⁶ level to control our actions, proliferating our life with karmic formations (*saṅkhārā*) that create and sustain our world, and feed and shape our unconscious.³⁷

The Abhidhamma tells us that there are **3 kinds of minds or consciousness**: the wholesome (*kusala*), the unwholesome (*akusala*) and the neutral (*avyākata*).³⁸ The arhats have neutral karma, only functional action, and suffer no new karmic fruits. We, so long as we are unawakened, are caught in the karmic duality of the wholesome and unwholesome (*kusalākusala*), binding us to samsara. Only arhats do not create karma; hence, they are not caught in samsara—they are not reborn at all.

Since arhats have fully liberated minds, they are neither defined nor detained by views or beliefs. Heavenly pleasures and hellish sufferings are as real as we imagine or believe them to be; they affect those who still believe in some kind of “selfhood” or “something” that abides eternally. Nothing is more real than our beliefs and nothing is more false—we are caught in this massive delusion—when we fail to see the true reality of impermanence, suffering and nonself. This is called samsara (*saṃsāra*)—the cycle of rebirths and redeaths we are caught in.

³³ See **Sabba S** (S 35.23), SD 7.1.

³⁴ *Tavatā papañcassa gati*. Comy: “The range of proliferation, in terms of craving, views and conceit, extends as far as the range of the 6 bases” (*Yattkā channaṃ phass’āyatanānaṃ gati, tattakā va tanhā, ditṭhi, māna, pabhedassa papañcassa gati*, AA 3:151,3-5).

³⁵ D 3:215; A 4:385; Dhs 7. Cousins thinks that *saṅkappa* perhaps means “thought formation”: “Vitakka/vitarka and vicāra,” *Indo-Iranian J* 35 1992:140.

³⁶ In early Buddhism, the “preconscious” is the intentional or formative stage just before an act, mental, verbal or bodily, is done: see SD 17.8b esp (1.1.2; 2.2); SD 7.10 (3.3).

³⁷ In early Buddhism, on **The unconscious**, SD 17.8b (1). On **consciousness, preconscious, subconscious, and unconscious**, see SD 17.8a (6.1).

³⁸ See Dhs 1.

2.5.1.2 Etymologically, *vitakka* is derived from *vi-* (a prefix denoting duality, expansion, intensity) + *takka*, “thinking, reasoning, sophistry, doubt.” Hence, it means “thinking, wondering.” **The (Catukka) Cara Sutta** (A 4.11) [2.3.2.2] records the Buddha as instructing us (through the monks) to be well mindful *in all our actions*. We are specifically instructed to let go of negative thoughts. The recurrent word here is “**thought**” (*vitakka*), that is, sensual thoughts (*kāma, vitakka*), thoughts of ill will (*vyāpāda, vitakka*) and violent thoughts (*vihiṃsa, vitakka*). These are called “wrong thoughts or intentions,” and should be diligently avoided.³⁹

These thoughts are unwholesome (they bring suffering to us and others), and self-feeding (they feed on our attachment to the self-idea); and grow prolifically, exponentially, crowding our minds and lives with notions of lust, ill will and violence. This is how we lose our humanity and fall into the subhuman states even here and now in this very human body. We may be born with a human body but our minds have yet to evolve from our animal states, defined by greed, hatred and delusion.

2.5.1.3 *Saṅkappa* comes from *saṃ-* (a prefix denoting “togetherness, oneness”)⁴⁰ + *kappa*, “creating, contriving,” giving the literal sense of “directing one’s mind towards a single contrived purpose,” that is, intending, intention, of which the usual technical term is *cetanā*. Such a mind, in whatever posture or activity, “**is to be without zeal, without moral fear, constantly and ever lazy, low in effort.**” We do not progress personally, mentally or spiritually. The reason for this is that we are in a very unwholesome state of mind: as we think so we are.⁴¹

2.5.2 Vitakka as intention

2.5.2.1 The (Chakka) Vitakka Sutta (A 6.109) [sutta translation below] states that the following 3 states are to be abandoned, that is: sensual thought (*kāma, vitakka*), thought of ill will (*vyāpāda, vitakka*) and (3) violent thought (*vihiṃsa, vitakka*) [§2]. These are actually the same as the 3 unwholesome roots—greed (*lobha*), hatred (*dosa*) and delusion (*moha*)—but with an extension of the 2nd root, that is, hatred is split or intensified into ill will and violence, that is, a hating thought and the intention to act on that hating thought.

The 3rd root, delusion, underpins the first 2 roots (in their various forms): we think that by “destroying” that object of hatred, we are free of it. In other words, we have turned the idea or memory of “hatred” into a fixed thing or something that is hatred. Our intention is thus to remove that “thing,” without our understanding that the hatred does not exist in itself. There are many other conditions that brought about what we experienced as a feeling of hatred. It is better that we begin by getting rid of that thought of hatred (say by cultivating “**non-ill will**” [§4], that is, lovingkindness) so that we do not *become* hatred and go on to *want* to destroy the “source” of our hatred. The actual source of that hatred and violence is actually our own mind. Hence, we need to work on our own mind.

We have analysed *vitakka* here (the thoughts of hatred and of violence) as **intentions** (*cetanā*) driven by the desire (*kāma*)—something we have seen or heard, sensed or thought about the other party—to obliterate the “cause” of our anger, etc, blinded by the delusion that such destructive acts will free us from the effects of what we see as suffering and undesirable. However, when we act on such

³⁹ On thinking as “sophistry,” ie, the way of the sophists or casuists (*takkika*), see K N Jayatilleke, *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*, London 1963, Delhi 1980:263-276.

⁴⁰ The Eng prefix *com-* as in “complete”; or *con-* as in “content”; or *col-* in “collateral”; or *co-* as in “co-worker.” These words follow sandhi rules, such as *com-* is used before labials b- m- or p-; *con-* before dentals d- n- t-.

⁴¹ See SD 57.34 (2.2.2).

negative thoughts, we only feed them, and they will grow in us into habits (*nati*) [2.3.1.1] or underlying tendencies (*anusaya*) [2.5.1.1].

The only way to truly resolve this arising of unwholesome thoughts—of *sensual desire*, of *ill will* and of *violence*—is by cultivating their opposites: *thoughts of renunciation* (*letting go*), of *non-ill will* (*loving-kindness*, and of *non-violence* (*compassion*)). [§4] By cultivating wholesome intentions, we resolve and remove the unwholesome intentions. We have therefore mastered our thoughts.⁴²

2.5.2.2 We see another important clue to the psychological nature of *vitakka* in the **Mahā Cattārī-saka Sutta** (M 117) [2.2.1.2], where a list of near-synonyms for right intention behind the noble disciple's speech includes "application of the mind" (*cetaso abhiniropanā*), alongside *vitakka*.⁴³ This suggests that the range of meanings of *vitakka* goes beyond conceptual thought as such, covering mental inclination or habit (*nati*). Both nuances of *vitakka* are in fact closely related to each other, since to reflect on or think of something requires a mental inclination towards the situation or issue at hand. The Sutta gives this list in the context of the disciple's right speech.

We thus see a further vital connection between the two aspects of *vitakka*—those of intention and of habit—in terms of **speech**. Here *vitakka* works together with *vicāra* (sustained thinking), a formation responsible for speech (*vacī, saṅkhāra*).⁴⁴ Thus when one is speaking, at times one may verbally express something that has already been fully thought out and formed in the mind. Yet, at times one may seem to just know what is to be spoken and the words flow naturally from the lips. At other times, one may be at a loss for words or need to seek the right words while speaking.

This verbal flow or continuity also falls within the range of *vitakka* functions, which cover more than just the fully formed thoughts at those times when we have already mentally deliberated on our speech. This coherent verbal continuity or conversation, in the sense of an application or inclination of the mind, requires the support of *vicāra* in order to be sustained coherently. [2.6.1.2]

2.6 STILLING DISTRACTING THOUGHTS

2.6.1 The Vitakka,saṅkhāra Sutta (M 20)

2.6.1.1 There is a simpler way of explaining how *vitakka, vicāra* works in terms of our speech process [2.5.22] and the 1st dhyana [2.5.2.3]. When we speak of *vitakka* as "initial application" and *vicāra* as "sustained application," we are actually speaking of the mind being deeply mindful of the mind-object and staying clearly aware of it. This is what happens in the speech of the noble disciples, especially the arhats; this is what happens in the mind of a good meditator who is also able to direct the mind to its object and keep it there so that it attains the 1st dhyana.

This is no easy task for an ordinary practitioner who has yet to attain dhyana. It is also no easy task to keep the mind focused on one's speech and keep the words flowing smoothly and to express them appropriately—as the Buddha when he is teaching Dharma. When the Buddha or an arhat teaches Dharma, we not only hear the Dharma, but we are also listening to an expression of the inner peace of an awakened mind. We not only hear **the Dharma** as an expression of true beauty; we also hear **the spirit** (*attha*) of Dharma, which is beautifully true. Beauty is truth, truth beauty; that is all we need to know.⁴⁵

⁴² See SD 17.5 (2.2.3).

⁴³ M 117,14/3:73,15 (SD 6.10) + Comy. Also Pm 1:79,9 f; Dhs 7 (DhsA 143,2), 21, 84; 298, 382; 73,15; Vibh 87,1.

⁴⁴ M 44,14-15/1:301 (SD 401.9),

⁴⁵ The Romantic poet, John Keats (1795-1821) ends his *Ode to a Grecian Urn* (1819) with these words: "When old age shall this generation waste, | Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe | Than ours, a friend to man, to whom

For most of us, the unawakened, we know neither the truth that directs the mind on its vision nor, even less, how to keep the mind on its vision. We are so easily distracted by what is neither true nor beautiful; we are distracted from the vision of truth and beauty by sensual distractions, the unwholesome, rooted in greed, hatred and delusion. Put another way: we then fail to see the beauty of *the unseen, the unheard, the unsensed and the unknown*; we are already overwhelmed by *the seen, the heard, the sensed and the known*.

2.6.1.2 To stop unwholesome thoughts from arising and persisting can, according to **the Vitakka,saṅghāna Sutta** (M 20), be undertaken in the following 5 ways:

- (1) “Attend to something wholesome instead” (*añña,nimitta*; thought displacement); if this does not work, then:
- (2) one may then direct attention to “the harmful consequences or disadvantages” of allowing unwholesome thoughts to continue (*vitakkāma ādīnavam*; aversion therapy); should this not work,
- (3) one could then try “completely ignoring them” (*amansikāra*; avoidance); or else,
- (4) one may try to bring about “stilling the thought-formations” (*vitakka,saṅghāna*, thought reduction),⁴⁶ after which the Sutta is named.
- (5) “clenching one’s teeth and pressing one’s tongue” (*dantebhidantam-ādhāya*), one directs the mind to the expelling of the unwholesome thoughts the way that the bodhisattva had done while undergoing austerities.⁴⁷

Apparently, the most effective of the listed methods is the 4th one; or one may apply each of these methods sequentially until the mind is cleared up and calmly stable.

2.6.2 The Paṃsu,dhovaka Sutta (A 3:100a)

2.6.2.1 A method of gradually overcoming distractions is given in **the Paṃsu,dhovaka Sutta** (A 3.100a). The Sutta compares dealing with distracting thoughts to the panning and refining of gold, where first gross impurities are washed away, followed by removing middling impurities (A 1:253). In a similar way, when attempting to purify the mind, first the gross thoughts, relating to overtly unwholesome conduct, are overcome or resolved.

Once these gross defilements have been removed, the middling thoughts, those related to *sensuality, ill will and harming*, should then be overcome. With these gone, there still remains the task to abandon subtle thoughts related to this and that, such as thoughts about one’s relatives, home country, reputation and so on.

Once these have all been abandoned, too, there only remain **dhmma,vitakka**, “thoughts about the Dharma.”⁴⁸ Further cultivation of the mind then leads to one-pointed concentration.⁴⁹

thou say'st, | 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty, —that is all | Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.' [CamilleGuth-rie] 15 Dec 2024.

⁴⁶ “Thought reduction” is basically asking oneself “Why” we feel this way? With the answer we again ask “Why?” and so on until the problem resolves itself.

⁴⁷ M 20/1:19 (SD 1.6).

⁴⁸ Comy gives an alternative explanation of **dhmma,vitakka** as the 10 corruptions of insight (*vipassanūpakkilesa,vitakka*, AA 2:362,25). These are: (1) light or radiance (*obhāsa*), (2) knowledge (*ñāṇa*), (3) zest (*pīti*), (4) tranquility, (5) happiness (*sukha*), (6) resolution (*adhimokkha*), (7) exertion (*paggaha*), (8) assurance (*upatṭhāna*), (9) equanimity (*upekkhā*), and (10) attachment (*nikanti*). These imperfections arise only in a beginner or one inexperienced, not a saint who has attained the truth. See Pm 2:100; Vism 20.105-130/633-638; AA 3:143. Also SD 32.7 (2.1.3.2); SD 32.10 (2.5.3); SD 56.22 (8.2.5).

⁴⁹ A 3.100a,4/1:254 (SD 19.11).

2.6.2.2 In fact, according to **the Samāṇa,maṇḍika Sutta** (M 78) [2.3.2.1], the cessation of unwholesome thoughts and intentions can be achieved (at least temporarily) by attaining the 1st dhyana.⁵⁰ This suggests the advantage of cultivating *samatha* for overcoming unwholesome thoughts. A meditation practice explicitly recommended for such transcending of thought is the breath mindfulness (U 37).

Any uncertainty regarding whether *dhmma,vitakka* refers to “thinking about Dharma” or to the 10 “impurities of insight” should not detain us here on a theoretical level. The point remains that at the most subtle level, some thoughts or experiences may occur and that these should be simply understood as “mind-states” (*dhmma*) and let them pass so that we can keep to the practise at hand.

2.6.2.3 The stress here is on **gradual practice** and gradual progress in one’s meditation. It would not be helpful to take up meditation with the unrealistic expectation that one would get a thought-free mind right away. The urgent priority is to first recognize the real state of one’s own mind at the time of sitting. Following the Buddha’s instructions—such as in **the Paṃsu,dhovaka Sutta** [2.6.2.1]—one should begin by recognizing one’s mental states in the following progressive manner:

- thoughts related to overtly unwholesome states (rooted in greed, hatred or delusion);
- thoughts tainted by some level of sensuality or anger or confusion;
- distracted thoughts other than the preceding;
- wholesome thoughts related to the Dharma.

Although this is not actually a meditative state, it is an effort in **wise attention** (*yoniso manasikāra*), gently preparing one’s mind to let go of expectations and thoughts. When one does this priming process properly, the mind will naturally settle into concentration, and by itself go into deeper concentration (M 1:16).

2.7 VITAKKA,VICĀRA

2.7.1 Thinking and pondering

2.7.1.1 In this study, we examine *vitakka* as “thinking” in two general perspectives: in our mundane (non-meditative) activities and in the meditative state or related to meditation. We still need to discuss a few more important aspects of thinking in a mundane setting before we go on to examine how it works or doesn’t with meditation.⁵¹

Vitakka in our daily life refers to “thinking” in a broad sense. This is the mental activity when we sense—see, hear, smell, taste or touch—something. We tend to *think* about it. Even more often, the mind, too, *thinks* up its own ideas, projects its own realities: they are called **views** (*diṭṭhi*), which literally means, “what is seen (in our mind).” We usually say here that we are “conceiving” an idea: we have *created* a notion—this is part of the aggregate of **formations** (*saṅkhārā*).

2.7.1.2 The reality, as we well know, is that we don’t just “think”: we think and we think. The 2nd “think” refers to when we go on working with the “initial” thought that has arisen—like when we first notice an interesting object displayed on the shelf in a shopping mall. We then “look again,” and keep thinking about it: “What is this? This must be good? Shall I buy it? How much is it? Is it worth it?” and so on. This is called “**pondering**” (*vicāra*), a sustained thinking activity.

⁵⁰ M 78,10/2:26 (SD 18.9).

⁵¹ If you are new to this subject of *vitakka*, you may like to take a short break here, and go on to read **SD 57.34 (2.2.1)** on “*Vitakka* as thinking.”

The same applies when we first look at a person, and then we look again, and again. The 1st look is when someone comes into our visual field; we see someone. The 2nd look may be “karmic” look; we notice something familiar about that person, that is, a perception or memory from the past connects with that vision (this person looks familiar, and so on). The 3rd look is usually (for an unawakened person) a look of lust! Something in that person attracts us.⁵²

2.7.2 Thinking as seeing

2.7.2.1 In the case of the Buddha, just a look (even the very first look) is enough for the Buddha to know (if the Buddha wishes) how ready (or not) the person is for Dharma and for spiritual transformation. Or how the Buddha should approach this person to give him or her a vision of the path. Often that vision may not arise immediately, but it will arise in due course, even if it takes a few lives! We may even say, for example, that those early arhats have all met some Buddha in the past. They have seen not only the Buddha but also a vision of the Dharma, which remains as a seed waiting to sprout at the right time. In studying the Dharma, we are gathering and planting those seeds of Dharmas even now. The time will come when they will sprout into the Bodhi tree.

2.7.2.2 On a mundane level, what keeps us **thinking**, what causes or feeds our thinking activity? Our sense-experiences are each a base or condition for thinking. When a sense-experience is rooted in desire, for example, it will arouse thoughts of desire in us. The roots of this reaction or habit go deep into the roots of **craving** (*taṇhā*), which is itself rooted in **ignorance**.⁵³ In other words, ignorance initiates our thinking, which is then fed by **greed** (*lobha*), or swayed by **hate** (*dosa*), or coloured by **delusion**. Thus, when we see something we *like*, we are fed by greed or lust; when we *dislike* it, we are swayed by hate; when we *neither* like nor dislike it, we have been numbed by ignorance (that is *delusion* on a deeper unconscious level).⁵⁴

2.8 VITAKKA IN MINDFULNESS AND MEDITATION

2.8.1 Thinking tires the mind

2.8.1.1 According to the **Dvedhāvitakka Sutta** (M 19), even though thoughts related to renunciation, non ill-will and harmlessness are entirely wholesome, yet, thinking will tire the mind and not lead to concentration. Hence, at some point even wholesome thoughts need to be left behind in order to steady the mind and bring it to deeper concentration.⁵⁵

However, though deeper stages of concentration will lead one’s mind *beyond* thoughts, this does not mean that *vitakka* has no place at all in the preliminary context of meditation. In fact, there are a number of reflective meditations described in the suttas involving suitable **recollections** (*anussati*). Six such recollections are well known; that is, the recollections on the Buddha, the Dharma, the noble sangha, or on one’s own moral conduct or generosity, or on the devas—depending on one’s need and inclination.⁵⁶

⁵² For technical details, see Cousins 1992.

⁵³ On how craving and ignorance work together, see SD 57.19a (1.2.2.3).

⁵⁴ On the usage of *vitakka* in meditation, as “initial application,” and *vicāra* as “sustained application,” see **Vitakka, vicāra**, SD 33.4, and we should then read further here on *vitakka*.

⁵⁵ M 19,8-10/1:116 (SD 61.1).

⁵⁶ See **(Chakka) Mahānāma S** (A 6.10), SD 15.3; **Himavanta S** (A 6.24/3:312), SD 21.14; SD 15.7 (1.1.2.1). A 3:312.

2.8.1.2 Thought (*vitakka*) also has a proper place in the practice of mindfulness meditation. This can be seen from the instructions given in **the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta** (M 10), which frequently express what is to be contemplated in direct speech, marked by the particle *iti* or briefly *ti* (marking the close of a direct quote). Thus, in the case of contemplating feelings (*vedanā'nupassanā*), for example, the instruction is that when one experiences a pleasant or a painful feeling, one should clearly know "I experience a pleasant feeling" or "I experience a painful feeling."⁵⁷

The focused mental verbalization done in this way keeps the mind on the feeling and deepens direct knowledge of the feeling. When the practice has advanced well enough, there is no more need of mental verbalization since the full awareness of feeling comes naturally.

In the cultivation of dhyana (*jhāna*), *vitakka* also has an important function that will be left behind only with deeper levels of concentration following the attainment of the 1st dhyana. To understand the dhyana-factor *vitakka* as referring to conceptual thought in this context would conflict with descriptions of the 1st dhyana given in the dhyana pericopes in the suttas. These indicate that the 1st dhyana is a far deeper experience than any mental state in which conceptual thought and reflection occur.

2.8.1.3 Just as in the articulation of speech, we see *vitakka* and *vicāra* giving mental direction and sustaining it [2.5.2.2], so too in deepening concentration the pair plays the same role. In the case of deepening concentration, *vitakka* stands for "initial application (of the mind)" (when the mind directs itself to the object) and the attention is then "transplanted" (*abhiniropeti*) to *vicāra*, "sustained application (of the mind)". Such a "mental application" leaves behind conceptual thinking preparing the mind to attain the 1st dhyana.

2.8.2 *Vitakka* as a dhyana-factor

2.8.2.1 *Vitakka* plays an important role in the cultivation of **dhyana** (*jhāna*). As we have noted, thought is only stilled in the peace of the deeper dhyanas (beyond the 1st dhyana) [2.8.1]. However, this role of *vitakka* in regard to the 1st dhyana is not without controversy. Before going on, it will be helpful to make a short survey of the implications of *vitakka* as **a dhyana-factor** (*jhāna'āṅga*) of the 1st dhyana.⁵⁸

According to **the Upakkilesa Sutta** (M 128), before his awakening the Buddha had to make great effort in order to attain the 1st dhyana.⁵⁹ In the case of his disciples Anuruddha (M 128) and Mahā Moggallāna (S 40.1), the Buddha's personal intervention was needed for them to be able to attain and stabilize the 1st dhyana.⁶⁰ To have such difficulties clearly shows that the 1st dhyana is a meditative level that requires considerable meditative expertise. Anuruddha and Mahā Moggallāna went on to become foremost amongst monks with mental powers due to their meditation abilities.⁶¹

The suttas also tell us that during the 1st dhyana, it is impossible to speak,⁶² and that the hearing of sounds is an obstruction to its attainment.⁶³ However, even with the 1st dhyana one has gone beyond

⁵⁷ M 10,32/1:59 (SD 13.3).

⁵⁸ The 1st dhyana has 5 dhyana-factors: (1) initial application (*vitakka*); (2) sustained application (*vicāra*); (3) zest (*pīti*); (4) joy (*sukha*); (5) concentration due to solitude (*viveka*). See **Dhyana** (SD 8.4 (5.1, 6)). See ***Vitakka, vicāra***, SD 33.4 (3); SD 8.4 (5.12).

⁵⁹ M 128,16/3:157 (SD 5.18).

⁶⁰ M 128,16/3:157 (SD 5.18); S 40.1/4:263 (SD 14.11).

⁶¹ Anuruddha is foremost of monks with the divine eye (A 1.192/1:23); Moggallāna is foremost of monks who have psychic powers (A 1.190/1:23).

⁶² **Rago, gata S** (S 36.11/4:217), SD 33.6.

⁶³ **Kaṇṭaka S** (A 10.72/5:135).

Mara's vision and power,⁶⁴ having reached the end of the world of the senses.⁶⁵ Māra's powers work best on sense-based existence but may extend higher when the conditions are right.⁶⁶

2.8.2.2 Though these passages [2.7.2.1] present the 1st dhyana as a profoundly deep state of mental concentration, the mental factors (*jhā'aṅga*) required for its attainment include, according to the standard formula, *vitakka* and *vicāra*. This pair is only left behind with the attainment of the 2nd dhyana.⁶⁷ To understand the dhyana-factor *vitakka* here as referring to *conceptual thought* conflicts with the descriptions of the 1st dhyana given in the dhyana pericopes, which make it clear that the 1st dhyana is something far deeper than any mental state in which conceptual thought and reflection take place.

We have already noted a vital clue to understanding the role of *vitakka* in dhyana given in **the Mahā Cattārīsaka Sutta** (M 117), which mentions "mental application" (*cetaso abhiniropānā*) alongside *vitakka* in a list of near-synonyms for right intention (M 3:73) [2.5.2.2]. This indicates that the range of meaning of *vitakka* goes beyond conceptual thought as such, covering also the sense of an inclination of the mind. Both nuances of *vitakka* are in fact closely related to each other, since to reflect on or think about something requires an inclination of the mind towards the subject.

2.8.2.3 We have also noted how from applied thought (*vitakka*) comes speech, which is sustained thought (*vicāra*) [2.5.2.2]. Likewise, in deepening concentration, too, *vitakka, vicāra* plays the same roles: while *vitakka* gets the mind to rise beyond conceptual thought, *vicāra* inclines the mind to deepening concentration until the 1st dhyana is reached and to remain therein. In other words, *vitakka, vicāra* plays the same role (as in speech) by "applying [transplanting] the mind" (*cittam abhiniropeti*) to its meditation object.⁶⁸

In the case of deepening concentration, *vitakka* stands for "**initial application of the mind**" (or simply "initial application") that is supported by *vicāra*, "**sustained application of the mind**" (or simply "sustained application"). Such inclining of the mind has to leave behind conceptual thinking in order to lead the mind into the attainment of the 1st dhyana. With the 2nd dhyana, then, even this last vestige of mental activity through inclining the mind is left behind; hence, the mind reaches true inner silence.⁶⁹ Such silence is not only free from conceptual thought, but also free from the "noise" of deliberate mental application.

Once all such conative and verbal activities of the mind have fully subsided, **the 2nd dhyana** arises—free from conceptual thought or any "noise" of mental application [2.5.2.3]; this is the "noble silence," the inner stillness that is free from the unwholesome roots [2.6.2.2].

2.8.2.4 How *vitakka, vicāra* works with the mind in attaining **the 1st dhyana** may be understood analogously from how we fluently speak a language without having to think of the alphabets, words, or phrases. The words just flow with our thoughts; an adept in meditation only needs to direct his or her mind to the meditation object and go with its flow. *Vitakka* directs the mind; *vicāra* sustains it on the mind-object. [2.5.2.2]

Thus, in the context of dhyana, *vitakka* should not be rendered as "thought," but rather it is "**initial application of the mind**." *Vicāra* is, on the other hand, "**sustained application of the mind**." These 2 terms show that they are not rooted in any unwholesomeness but occur as a natural consequence of a

⁶⁴ Nivāpa S (M 25,11/1:159), SD 61.2.

⁶⁵ Lok'āyatikā Brāhmaṇā S (A 9.38/4:430), SD 35.2.

⁶⁶ On Māra's power over the whole cosmos, see SD 61a (3.2.2).

⁶⁷ On the intermediate stage when *vitakka* has already been left behind but *vicāra* is still present see **Upakkilesa S** (S 46.33/5:92 f).

⁶⁸ MA:Se 3:541,9; DhA 143,2; UA 220,1; *ettha sammā, saṅkappo sahaajāta, dhamme ~eti*, DA1:314,14;.

⁶⁹ S 2:273; cf Tha 650, 999.

mind that is *free from sensual desire, ill will, restlessness and worry, sloth and torpor, and doubt* (that is, the 5 mental hindrances). It is a mind going into dhyana.

2.8.2.5 A note on the translation of *vitakka* as “thought” or “thinking.” The following note from **L S Cousins** is worth keeping in mind:

It is clear that it can always be rendered as “thinking” or “thought,” although it is unlikely that this would have the same significance as the concept does for us today. Of course this is even more unlikely among a community containing many contemplatives. It may therefore be the case that thought was already pictured as essentially the activity of bringing different objects into firm focus before the mind's eye—be those objects thoughts or mental pictures. Such a view of the matter would after all be very natural to people with a very highly developed eidetic faculty.
(Cousins, “Vitakka/Vitarka and vicāra,” 1992:139)

Cousins’ reminder is that we may use a modern word for a Pali term but we should well understand its meaning and usage in the suttas. Useful as this reservation may be, such redefinitions may not, however, always be apparent to the reader. Thus, translations like “initial application” and “sustained application” are more accurate in the context of dhyana and deep concentration.

2.8.2.6 The interrelation between *vitakka* and *vicāra* is described in **the Visuddhi,magga** with a set of similes showing their complementary actions, that is, like:

- the striking of a gong and the gong’s reverberation;
 - a bird that spreads out both its wings and then soars up into the sky;
 - a bee that flies towards a lotus flower and then hovers over it;
 - one holds a dish with one hand and cleans it with the other;
 - a potter turns the wheel with one hand and shapes the pottery with the other hand;
 - with a pin fixed to the centre (of a board) and strung to another pin with which one draws a circle.
- (Vism 4,89/142)

2.8.2.7 The Vimutti,magga (Vimm) (on which the Visuddhi,magga is based)⁷⁰ only mentions the analogy of:

“a bird, having taken off into the sky from a mound, flaps its wings, so is *vitakka*; like the bird’s gliding (in the sky), so is *vicāra*.”
(Vimm 8.19; Vimm:Ñ 288)

The imagery in both Vism and Vimm similarly further highlights the role of *vitakka* as initiating mental activity, be this thinking and reflecting, or the mental activity of cultivating concentration through inclining the mind towards a particular meditation-object.

Vimm, however, adds, as stated in **the Peṭakopadesa**, that:

“Through *vitakka* one sustains; through *vicāra* one explores [examines].⁷¹

⁷⁰ Vimm contains much materials from Peṭakopadesa and Milinda,pañha. Vimm gives an analysis of *vitakka*, *vicāra* in terms of *lakkhaṇa*, *rasa*, *paccupaṭṭhāna* and *padaṭṭhāna*. This last is a standard method of analysing *dharmas* in comy literature, and is prob partly derived from the 16 *hāras* of Peṭk (Nett:Ñ liv).

⁷¹ In this def, we see *vitakka* and *vicāra* as synonyms, except that *vitakka* is the 1st instance of the sustained effort.

Through *vitakka* one thinks; through *vicāra*, one explores.”⁷² (Peṭk 142; Vimm 8.19; see Vimm:Ñ 289)

Apparently, Vimm sees *vitakka*, *vicāra* as having 2 aspects or levels of perception (*saññā*), reflected in the following definitions of the dvandva:

“The action of *vitakka* is non-attention to unwholesome states; the action of *vicāra* is resolving upon the dhyanas.”⁷³ (Peṭk 142; id)

“(*Vitakka*) is like a reciter⁷⁴ who is silently listening to a sutta; *vicāra* is when he is contemplating its meaning.” (Peṭk 142; id)

“*Vitakka* is like trying to understand what has yet to be understood; *vicāra* is like the understanding of it.”⁷⁵ (Peṭk 143; id)

Finally, Vimm interprets the 4 analytic knowledges (*paṭisambhidā*) [2.3.1.2] as follows:

“The analytic knowledges of language and of ready wit are *vitakka*; The analytic knowledges of Dharma and of meaning are *vicāra*.”⁷⁶ (id)

“The mind’s skill in distinction is *vitakka*; the mind’s skill in analysing is *vicāra*.”⁷⁷ (id)

2.9 VITAKKA IMAGERY

2.9.1 *Vitakka* that is not free

2.9.1.1 The suttas illustrate the nature of *vitakka* with the help of a number of similes. One of these compares the arising of *vitakka* to a **crow** that has been bound by a string to its foot, and is then tossed up into the air by children.⁷⁸ This imagery shows how the movement of thought may easily give an illusion of personal freedom; but on closer inspection this turns out to be a state of bondage (the mind is

⁷² *Anupālati vitakketi, vicarati vicāreti. Vitakkayati vitakketi, anuvicarati vicāreti* (Peṭk 142,16). What follows is not found in Vimm, *Kāma,saññāya paṭipakkho vitakko, byāpāda,saññāya vihiṃsa,saññāya ca paṭipakkho vicāro*, “*Vitakka* is the opposite of perception of sensuality; and *vicāra* is the opposite of the perception of ill will and of harming” (Peṭk 142,17 f).

⁷³ *Vitakkānaṃ kammaṃ akusalassa amanasikāro, vicārānaṃ kammaṃ jeṭṭhānaṃ saṃvāraṇā* (Peṭk 142). As Ñāṇamoli notes (1964:191 n582/2), *jeṭṭhānaṃ*, “forerunners,” in the Pāli text is “an odd expression.” 受持於禪 *shòu chí yú chán* corresponds to *jhānaṃ/jhānāni adhiṭṭhānaṃ*. It is likely that *jeṭṭhānaṃ* was an early copyist’s error for *jhānaṃ adhiṭṭhānaṃ*; which supports the tr above.

⁷⁴ 人有力 *rén yǒulì* means “a strong man.” “Saṅghapāla misunderstood *paliko* as **baliko* (fr *balin*, “strong”) or had a text with the reading *baliko*” (Vimm:Ñ). *Yathā paliko tuṇhiko sajjhāyaṃ karoti evaṃ vitakko, yathā taṃ yeva anupassati evaṃ vicāro* (Peṭk 142, Be 262). *Paliko* might be a corruption of **pālīko*. Cf *yesaṃ pālī paguṇā, te pālīm sajjhāyanti* (DA 2:581).

⁷⁵ 如覺所覺覺已能知觀 *rú jué suǒ jué jué yǐ néng zhī guān*. Cf *yathā apariññā evaṃ vitakko, yathā pariññā evaṃ vicāro* (Peṭk 142). Cf *idaṃ kusalaṃ idaṃ akusalaṃ idaṃ bhāvetabbam idaṃ pahātabbam idaṃ sacchikātabban ti vitakko, yathā pahānaṃ ca bhāvanā ca sacchikiriyaṃ ca evaṃ vicāro* (Peṭk 143).

⁷⁶ *Nirutti,paṭisambhidāyaṃ ca paṭibhāna,paṭisambhidāyaṃ ca vitakko, dhamma,paṭisambhidāyaṃ ca attha,paṭisambhidāyaṃ ca vicāro*. (Peṭk 142)

⁷⁷ 心解於勝是覺心解分別是觀 *xīn jiě yú shèng shì jué xīn jiě fēnbié shì guān*. Peṭk 142: *Kallitā kosallattam cittassa vitakko, abhinīhāra,kosallam cittassa vicāro* (Peṭk 142 f).

⁷⁸ S 1:207; Sn 271; cf comy at SA 1:304.

still fixed on some idea), comparable to the crow that flies up into the air, only to fall back on the ground due to being bound by the string.

This condition of bondage manifests in particular with unwholesome thoughts, and it is such types of thoughts with which most of the similes are concerned. **The Paṃsu,dhovaka Sutta** (A 3.101) says that unwholesome thoughts are comparable with corruptions of gold that need to be removed in order for the gold to become flawless, bright and workable, fit for being fashioned into an ornament by a goldsmith.⁷⁹ **The Andha,karaṇa Sutta** (It 3.4.8) says that unwholesome thoughts are like a cloud of dust that should be settled, just as a shower of rain will settle any dust.⁸⁰ The images of dust and impurities bring out the blinding or obstructive nature of unwholesome thoughts, and the need to overcome them so that we have access to the mind's potential freedom.

2.9.1.2 According to **the Vitakka,saṇṭhāna Sutta** (M 20) [2.6.1], unwholesome thoughts are like the carcass of a snake or dog, or even like a human corpse, that is hung around the neck of a young man or woman who is fond of ornaments.⁸¹ This dreadful imagery brings out in particular the repulsive nature of unwholesome thoughts. **The Kaṭuviya Sutta** (A 3.128) compares unwholesome thoughts to flies that are attracted to rotting meat.⁸² The rotting meat in this simile stands for greed and ill will. These similes emphasize the degrading and disgusting nature of such thoughts, and the manner in which they can defile the mind.

2.9.2 Vitakka that frees

2.9.2.1 **The Vitakka,saṇṭhāna Sutta** further compares unwholesome thoughts to a large peg, which a carpenter removes with the help of a finer peg.⁸³ The use of the finer peg here refers to directing the mind to something wholesome in order to overcome unwholesome thoughts. **The (Catukka) Nāga Sutta** (A 4.114) compares the successful removal of unwholesome thoughts to the ability of a king's elephant to successfully overcome enemies in battle.⁸⁴

The need to restrain unwholesome thought, says **the Dvedhā,vitakka Sutta** (M 19), is similar to a cowherd who has to flog his cows in order to prevent them from straying into ripe corn and eating them.⁸⁵ These images highlight the importance of confronting and removing unwholesome thought. This importance is related not only to mental cultivation but also to the fact that *thought eventually leads to action*.

This relationship between thought and action is explained in **the Vammika Sutta** (M 23) by comparing *vitakka* to an anthill (vammika) that *smokes at night*, an allusion to the mind's restless planning, and the execution of these plans is like *fire in the day*.⁸⁶ The analogy of smoke and fire suggests both an uneasiness and uncertainty that unsettles the mind both night and day.⁸⁷

2.9.2.2 These illustrations of the nature of *vitakka* highlight in particular the problem of unwholesome thoughts and the need to overcome them. The same is also the theme of **Dhammapada** verses

⁷⁹ A 3.100a/1:253 (SD 19.11).

⁸⁰ It 87/3.4.8/82

⁸¹ M 20,4/1:119 (SD 1.6).

⁸² A 3.128/1:280.

⁸³ M 20,3/1:119 (SD 1.6).

⁸⁴ A 4.114/2:227 (SD 46.8).

⁸⁵ M 19,7/1:115 (SD 61.1).

⁸⁶ M 23,4/1:145 (SD 28.13).

⁸⁷ For practical instructions on dealing with thinking and pondering, see SD 62.10d (1.2.2.1).

which contrast those who are in bondage, due to being unable to control their thoughts, to those who have mastered thought and thereby go beyond bondage:⁸⁸

<i>vitakka, pamathitassa jantuno tibba, rāgassa subhānupassino bhiyyo taṇhā, pavaḍḍhati esa kho daḷhaṃ karoti bandhanam.</i>	For a person overwhelmed by thought, who, wildly passionate, looks for the beautiful, craving grows even more, he, indeed, hardens [his own state of] bondage. (Dh 349)
<i>vitakkūpasame ca yo rato asubham bhāvayati sadā sato esa kho vyantikāhiti esa checchati māra, bandhanam</i>	Who delights in calming thought, ever mindfully cultivates (perception of) impurity— he will remove (craving), he will cut Māra's bond. (Dh 350)

3 Beyond vitakka

3.1 LIMITATIONS OF WORDS AND THOUGHTS

3.1.1 The 3 good truths

3.1.1.1 As we become more familiar with the suttas and their teachings, we are likely to notice that early Buddhism is clearly aware of **the limitations of words and thought**, and the Buddha often reminds us not to be fettered by words (they have no “self”!) and to understand what these words point to. They are like signboards and landmarks, and have to be correctly read. Even then, there are occasions when we need to ask for directions or better have an accomplished guide with us.

The best guides are, of course, the Buddha and the arhats. The teachings are still with us preserved in the early Buddhist canon. Hence, it greatly helps for us to know some Pali, and to read the suttas themselves, turning to the Commentaries when needed. Teachers and scholars can be a great help in understanding the words of the teaching, but the meaning and purpose (*attha*) of the teachings are what we need to learn and discover for ourselves.

3.1.1.2 Notice that the Pali *attha* has the English senses of “meaning” and also of “purpose.” It is not accidental that *attha* is polysemous, that is, both senses apply to *attha*. The *meaning* and the *purpose* of the Dharma cannot be separated because they refer to the same process—of *knowing* the Dharma—that is, knowing in the sense of proper understanding (*pariyatti*) and in the sense of true realization (*paṭivedha*). And both understanding and realization are interconnected by proper practice (*paṭipatti*).

When we are new to the Dharma, we would want to understand the meaning of the suttas that we read or hear. Scholars and their writings help us to master these meanings on the word level, and we accumulate **knowledge** of the Dharma. Yet we have never heard of any “awakened” scholar or one who has become a streamwinner through merely knowing the words of the suttas, however useful they may be.

3.1.2 Words and thoughts as learning tools

3.1.2.1 Words can mean anything to anyone or may be interpreted in different ways; thoughts may define how we stand now but we simply keep changing our minds. Our words and thoughts are mere

⁸⁸ On the prosodic nn of the Pali, see Dh:N 146.

tools for our views. We use them to shape more ideas, create things and mobilize people. Neither the tools nor the words really define each other; nor do we—we only “make sense” of them for ourselves. Ideally, what makes “sense” for us should also make us a better person, or at least a happy and good person. We may begin there but cannot stop there.

Even non-Buddhists can master, or claim to master, the Buddhist Word, but for us to realize the Buddha’s teachings, we need to know rightly its **purpose** and be inspired by that purpose, and live with that purpose. This is the meaning of “**studying, practising and realizing**” Buddha Dharma. These are called the 3 good truths (*tayo saddhamma*).⁸⁹

The Dhamma,cakka Pavattana Sutta (SD 56.11) describes for us a full mastery of the 4 noble truths by way of 3 phases (*ti,parivaṭṭa*)⁹⁰ and 12 aspects (*dvādas’ākāra*), which seems to be a later teaching model, probably post-Buddha.⁹¹ **The 3 phases** (*ti,parivaṭṭa*) concern the 3 levels of knowledge of the truths, that is:

- | | |
|--|-------------------|
| (1) knowledge of each truth, | <i>sacca,ñāṇa</i> |
| (2) knowledge of the task to be done regarding each truth, and | <i>kicca,ñāṇa</i> |
| (3) knowledge of the accomplishment of these tasks. | <i>kata,ñāṇa</i> |

These 3 phases of each of the 4 truths total up as their 12 aspects (*dvādas’ākāra*). The Commentarial version of these 3 phases are called the 3 “good truths” (*saddhamma*), namely,

<i>sacca,ñāṇa</i> :	the true teaching as <u>theory</u> (textual learning),	<i>pariyatti saddhamma</i>
<i>kicca,ñāṇa</i> :	the true teaching as <u>practice</u> (moral virtue and mental training/meditation), and	<i>paṭipatti saddhamma</i>
<i>kata,ñāṇa</i> :	the true teaching as <u>realization</u> (wisdom).	<i>paṭivedha saddhamma</i>

(VA 225; AA 5.33; cf Nm 143 where the first two are listed)

3.1.2.2 In simple terms, the 3 “good truths” refer to the 3 levels of full learning, that is, the stages of Dharma *theory, practice and realization*. First, we master the Dharma **theoretically** by listening to a teacher, scholar, or informant, and by reading or other means. This is at best a 2nd-hand or 3rd-hand learning, but forms a useful starting-pointing to open up our minds to a wider view of the Dharma.

By **practising** the Dharma, we let go of our own views and biases as we understand and accept the Dharma as it is, as reflecting true reality. As we gradually *see* the Dharma within ourselves—meaning we give up the idea of “something” of our self, we realize the “self” is nothing more than our own *mind and language* (how minds communicate). Thus we may speak of “ourselves,” but there is *not* a single abiding self. We grow in our **realization** of how things are *interrelated* by a network of causes and effects. We then attain awakening that uproots our craving and ignorance, thus freeing us from suffering.

3.2 MUSIC OF THE SILENT MIND

3.2.1 Despite the fact that the Buddha is clearly aware of the limitations of words and thoughts, he does not totally reject them. He sees them only as tools that we have to use for understanding ourselves and

⁸⁹ On the 3 good truths, see **The levels of training** SD 40a.4 (6.2.1); **Notion of *ditṭhi*** SD 40a.1 (3.4.2).

⁹⁰ On their ancient source in the 3 “good truths” (*saddhamma*), see SD 46.18 (1.2).

⁹¹ **Dhamma,cakka Pavattana** (S 56.11,9-12/5:422), SD 1.1. See A Wayman, “The sixteen aspects of the four noble truths and their opposites,” *Journal of the International Assoc of Buddhist Studies* 3,2 1980:67-76. On the lateness of the Sutta, see **Notion of *ditṭhi***, SD 40a.1 (2.2).

the world. **The parable of the raft**⁹² means just that: we use these tools so long as we need them; once the work is done, we let go of personal views for liberating wisdom. This is a gradual yet joyful process.

To some extent, this attitude to the gradual training reflects the early Buddhist view of thought and concept, in that clear awareness of their limitations does not lead to a wholesale rejection. In fact, *vitakka* fulfils an important role in the Buddhist path, as stated in **the Ariya Pariyesanā Sutta** (M 26), a path that eventually leads to what is **beyond thought** (*atakkâvacara*).⁹³

This pragmatic attitude towards *vitakka* as an important but limited tool pervades the early Buddhist analysis of its significance and manifestations. Important aspects of this analysis are the early Buddhist ethical perspective on *vitakka*, the psychological analysis of its arising, the role of *vitakka* in the context of dhyana, and various imageries related to the term.

3.2.2 This was how we began this study. Now is the time for us to recollect what we have learned, what we have yet to understand. We see this beautiful tapestry of colourful and joyful silence patched with random empty pockets through which words and thoughts seem to filter.

This is like listening to a beautiful piece of music, bringing us joy, peace and spaciousness. As we lose ourselves in the music, we notice that they are merely **the sounds of the silence** that allow us to enjoy the beauty of the music. As we penetrate the music, we begin to feel and become the silence that creates the music. This is an analogy of the sounds of the world and beings that turn into smiles of wise silence (*moneyya*).

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⁹² On the parable of the raft, see **Alagaddûpama S** (M 22,14) SD 3.13.

⁹³ M 26,19/1:167 (SD 1.11).

(Chakka) Vitakka Sutta

The (Sixes) Discourse on Thoughts

A 6.109

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| <p>1 (Originating in Sāvatthi.)</p> <p>2 There are, bhikshus, these 3 states.
What are the three?
 (1) Sensual thought;
 (2) thought of ill will;
 (3) violent thought.
 These, bhikshus, are the 3 states.</p> <p>3 These are the 3 states, bhikshus, to be abandoned.⁹⁴</p> <p>4 Three (other) states are to be cultivated.
What are the three?
 (1) For the abandoning of <u>the sensual thought</u>
 a thought of renunciation is to be cultivated.
 (2) For the abandoning of <u>the thought of ill will</u>
 a thought of non-ill will is to be cultivated.
 (3) For the abandoning of <u>the violent thought</u>
 a thought of non-violence is to be cultivated.</p> <p>5 These, bhikshus, are the 3 states to be abandoned.</p> <p>These are the 3 states to be cultivated.</p> | <p>(<i>sāvatthī, nidanaṃ</i>)</p> <p><i>tayo’me bhikkhave dhammā</i>
 <i>katame tayo</i>
 <i>kāma, vitakko</i>
 <i>vyāpāda, vitakko</i>
 <i>vihiṃsā, vitakko</i>
 <i>ime kho bhikkhave tayo dhammā</i>
 <i>Imesaṃ kho bhikkhave tiṇṇaṃ</i>
 <i>dhammānaṃ pahānāya</i></p> <p><i>tayo dhammā bhāvetabbā</i>
 <i>katame tayo</i>
 <i>kāma, vitakkassa pahānāya</i>
 <i>nekkhamma, vitakko bhāvetabbo</i>
 <i>vyāpāda, vitakkassa pahānāya</i>
 <i>avyāpāda, vitakko bhāvetabbo</i>
 <i>vihiṃsā, vitakkassa pahānāya</i>
 <i>avihiṃsā, vitakko bhāvetabbo</i></p> <p><i>Imesaṃ kho bhikkhave tiṇṇaṃ</i>
 <i>dhammānaṃ pahānāya</i>
 <i>ime tayo dhammā bhāvetabbā ti.</i></p> |
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—evaṃ—

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⁹⁴ See (2.5.2.1).