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## Vitakka Saṅḥāna Sutta

The Discourse on the Stilling of Thoughts | M 20

Theme: How to overcome distractions during meditation

Translated by Piya Tan ©2003 2013 2020

### 1 Summary and related suttas

#### 1.1 SUMMARY AND MNEMONIC

**1.1.1 The Vitakka Saṅḥāna Sutta**, the discourse on the stilling of thoughts (M 20), records **5 methods** taught by Buddha that a meditator should use to direct his mind away from any distraction to his meditation. In fact, these methods also serve as effective means for mental focus *in daily tasks* like studying and working, and even in *psychotherapy*, such as the treatment for phobias.

**1.1.2** Using modern psycholingo **mnemonic**, we can list the 5 means of overcoming mental distractions, as follows:

#### REMOVING THE DISTRACTION

(1) by a different sign that is wholesome	<i>añña, nimitta</i>	thought displacement	[§3]
(2) by examining its danger	<i>vitakkānaṃ ādīnavaṃ</i>	aversion therapy	[§4]
(3) by disregarding them	<i>amanasikāra</i>	non-attention or avoidance	[§5]
(4) by stilling thought-formations	<i>vitakka saṅḥāna</i>	thought reduction or mental analysis	[§6]
(5) by teeth-clenching and tongue-pressing	<i>dantēbidantam-ādhāya</i>	sustained effort	[§7]

The last is simply an abbreviated mnemonic for “**with clenched teeth and the tongue pressing on the palate**” (*dantēbhidantam-ādhāya jivhāya tālum āhacca*).

**1.2** From the Sutta itself, it is clear that **the 5 signs** (*nimitta*) refer to techniques we can use for removing distracting thoughts, which should only be resorted to, “from time to time” [§3], that is, when such distractions are persistently disrupt our meditation. Often enough a seeming distraction, such as a noise, a physical feeling or a thought, may arise and then pass away without really distracting us.

So long as we are able to keep our mind focused on the meditation object, we will notice such passing distractions slowly but surely receding into the background and become unnoticeable. On such occasions, we should simply remain with our meditation object and practice. In other words, so long as we feel calm and some sense of focus, we should remain just as we are; perhaps, giving a gentle inner smile to our meditation object. Only when this peace and focus is disrupted do we apply the 5 signs as necessary. (MA 2:87) [§3]

**1.3** This Sutta has been translated with its Commentary and Sub-commentary by Soma Thera in *The Removal of Distracting Thoughts*.<sup>1</sup> Ñāṇamoli & Bodhi translated it in *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha* (rev ed 2001). The Chinese Āgama parallel (MĀ 101)<sup>2</sup> is entitled 增上心經 *Zēng shàng xīn jīng*, agreeing with M 20 here on locating the discourse at Jeta’s grove near Sāvattihī. The Chinese Āgama version, MĀ 101, has been studied in some detail by Thich Minh Chau (1991:240-244).

<sup>1</sup> Wheel 21, Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1960.

<sup>2</sup> MĀ 101 = T1.588a-589a.

## 2 The 5<sup>th</sup> method

### 2.1 JAIN INFLUENCE?

**2.1.2** The 5th method (sustained effort) [§7] is interesting in that it is the first of the Bodhisattva's self-mortification methods mentioned in **the Mahā Saccaka Sutta** (M 36):

I thought thus, “Suppose, with my teeth clenched and my tongue pressed against my palate, I beat down the mind with mind.” While I did so, it was just like a strong man holding a weaker man by the head or by the shoulders, were to restrain, subdue, attack him—sweat ran down from my armpits.

But although tireless energy was aroused in me and unremitting mindfulness was established, my body was overstrained and uncalm because I was exhausted by the painful striving. But such painful feeling that arose in me did not invade my mind and remain.

(M 36,20/1:242 f), SD 49.4

**2.1.3** Some scholars think that this 5<sup>th</sup> method is out of place here, in the Vitakka Saṅḥāna Sutta, as the Buddha discourages the practice of self-mortification. Scholars, such as W L King and J Bronkhorst [2.2.2], think that the inclusion of this method was due to Jain influence, that “Jain practices had come to be accepted by at least some Buddhists.”<sup>3</sup> This view is, of course, conjectural at best.

Although this method did not work in bringing awakening to the Bodhisattva, it is here not actually a method based on self-mortification, but a gesture of **unrelenting determination** [2.2.4.1]. In fact, the Vitakka Saṅḥāna Sutta does not present this 5<sup>th</sup> method as one that, on its own, brings about awakening. It is only a method of last resort, to be applied only when all the other attempts to overcome unwholesome thoughts have failed [2.2].<sup>4</sup>

### 2.2 THE LAST RESORT

**2.2.1** The 5th method [2.1.2] should not be understood as “will-power” as this goes against the teachings of **the (Dasaka) Cetanā’karaṇīya Sutta** (A 10.2)<sup>5</sup> and **the (Ekādasaka) Cetanā’karaṇīya Sutta** (A 11.2),<sup>6</sup> both of which teach that proper meditation is the cultivating of mindfulness and letting go of distractions and defilements in a natural way (with sustained effort but without will-power) by simply allowing the proper wholesome states to arise, and then even letting go of these, too, in due course.<sup>7</sup>

In other words, we can neither wish nor pray for progress in meditation, as instructed in **the (Pañcaka) Iṭṭha Sutta** (A 5.43), which says that whatever wholesome state that we desire, we should live in a manner that is wholesome for achieving that state. For meditation, this is living a life and cultivating the mind in a way that conduces to the success of the practice.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>3</sup> W L King 1980:10. Quote by J Bronkhorst 1999:86.

<sup>4</sup> Gombrich, in fact, says that he does “not find it at all strange that a technique which, used in itself and taken to excess, turned out not to lead to Enlightenment, could be recommended ... for overcoming a particular difficulty” (1994:1080).

<sup>5</sup> A 10.2,1/5:2-4 (SD 41.6).

<sup>6</sup> A 11.2,1-10 (SD 33.3b).

<sup>7</sup> See SD 47.2 (2.2.1).

<sup>8</sup> A 5.43/3:47-49 (SD 47.2).

**2.2.2** Bronkhorst, in his *The Two Traditions of Meditation in Ancient India*, thinks that the 5<sup>th</sup> method contradicts the Buddha’s teaching (or practice). The method described thus: “With my teeth clenched and my tongue pressed against my palate...” is part of the Bodhisattva’s self-mortification, he argues, so that in the Vitakka Saṅḥāna Sutta, “monks are advised to do what is incorrect elsewhere [M 1:242]” (1993: 54)!<sup>9</sup>

**2.2.3** The method actually fits the list quite nicely as the last one, that is, it is the last resort. These are methods for overcoming a distracted mind: when all else fails, obviously we must have some *sustained effort*! Indeed, the instruction to clench our teeth and press the tongue against the palate works literally (we focus on the pressure points in the mouth) or, figuratively, by putting in more effort, details of which are found elsewhere.<sup>10</sup>

Nowhere in the ancient texts does the Buddha ever declare that this particular method is wrong or should be rejected. He only mentions it to be one of the difficult methods he used in attempting to gain insight into the nature of true reality. However, for less experienced meditators, such a method, properly applied, can help in ridding the mind of distractions.

### 2.2.4 Related suttas

**2.2.4.1 The (Duka) Upaṇṇāta Sutta** (A 2.5) similarly teaches one not to be content with wholesome mental states and to be unremitting—“Willingly, I will let only skin, sinews and bones remain; let my body dry up, and flesh and blood, too; but there will be no end in effort until I have won what can be won by personal strength, personal effort, personal striving!”<sup>11</sup>

**2.2.4.2** The Vitakka Saṅḥāna Sutta, dealing with the taming of the mind, should be studied with such suttas as **the Āghāta Paṭivīnaya Sutta 1** (A 5.161) (on 5 methods of putting away ill will) and the **Daddabha Jātaka** (J 322), a classic in thought analysis. Another interesting and practical text in this connection is **the (Moggallāna) Pacalā Sutta** (A 7.58).<sup>12</sup>

**2.2.4.3 The Āghāta Paṭivīnaya Sutta 1** (A 5.161) is a short text giving 5 methods of removing ill will:

- |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(1) <u>lovingkindness</u></li> <li>(2) <u>compassion</u></li> <li>(3) <u>equanimity</u></li> </ul> | } | should be cultivated towards that person one resents. |
| (4) one should not mind the person that one resents; <u>one should disregard him</u> . <sup>13</sup>                                      |   |   |
| (5) <u>one should determine thus</u> . <sup>14</sup>  |   |   |

<sup>9</sup> For further discussion, see **Sañcetanika S** (A 10.206), SD 3.9 (6.5).

<sup>10</sup> Eg **Mahā Saccaka S** (M 36,20/1:242 f), SD 49.4 (also at SD 1.12).

<sup>11</sup> A 2.5/1:50 (SD 51.5).

<sup>12</sup> See **Pacalā S** (A 7.58/4:85-91), SD 4.11.

<sup>13</sup> MA suggests 5 other methods for overcoming distracting thoughts: (1) Occupy oneself with something else; (2) recite some work explaining a doctrine; (3) read a Dharma text (like a pūjā book); (4) examine the parts of an object from his bag, like fire-sticks (“this is the upper stick; this is the lower stick”); (5) carefully and reflectively examine his requisites (“this is the awl; this is a pair of scissors; this is the nail cutter; this is the needle”; (6) darn the worn-out parts of the robe. (MA 3:90 f).

<sup>14</sup> This reflection on karma is given in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person pl (“beings”) in **Cūḷa Kamma Vibhaṅga S** (M 135,4/3:202).

“This person is the owner of his karma, heir to karma, born in karma, bound by karma, has karma as his refuge.<sup>15</sup> Whatever karma one does, good or evil, one is heir to it.”

(A 5.161/3:185 f), SD 12.23

### 3 Santhāna

**3.1** The key word of the Sutta is clearly *saṅṭhāna*, and the Pali-English Dictionary (PED) gives 3 meanings to it, here listed in abridged form:

- (1) configuration, position; composition, nature, shape, form (V 2:76; M 1:120 vl *santhāna*; A 1:50, 4:190; Miln 270, 316, 405; J 1:71, 291, 368, 2:108).
- (2) fuel (J 2:330 = 4:471).
- (3) (usu spelt *santhāna*) a resting place, meeting place, public place, market (cp Skt *saṁsthāna* in this meaning) (S 1:201; J 6:113).

**3.2** There is also the form *santhana* which, according to the PED, means (1) appeasing (Dh 275); (2) satisfaction (Vv 18.6).

**3.3** The Commentaries offer no help here. **Bodhi**, in *The Middle Length Discourses*, evidently reads the word as *santhana*, rendering it as “stilling” (M:ÑB 213). Various other translators have given their own free renderings. Apparently, only I B Horner renders *saṅṭhāna* as “form,” which though technically correct, is not as contextually appropriate as “stilling” [§6]. And the context here is meditation.

### 4 Result of the practice

**4.1** The Vitakka Saṅṭhāna Sutta concludes with these words:

*Yaṃ vuccati bhikkhave bhikkhu vasī vitakka,pariyāya,pathesu. Yaṃ vitakkaṃ ākaṅkhissati taṃ vitakkaṃ vitakkessati. Yaṃ vitakkaṃ n’ākaṅkhissati, na taṃ vitakkaṃ vitakkessati. Acchechi tanhaṃ, vāvattayī<sup>16</sup> saṃyojanaṃ sammā mānābhisamayaṃ antam akāsi dukkhassa.<sup>17</sup>*

That monk, bhikkhus, is called **a master of the thought-paths**. He will think only the thought that he wants to think; he will not think the thought that he does not want to think. He has cut off craving, discarded the fetters, penetrated conceit and made an end of suffering. [§8.2]

Both M 20 and its Chinese Āgama version state that the use of the 5 methods will bring one mastery of one’s thought, leading to the ability to think only those thoughts that one really wants to think. The Pali version concludes by stating that such a practitioner has “made an end of suffering” (*antam akāsi dukkhassa*), a stock phrase that usually refers to the attainment of **arhathood**.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> See **Saṃsappaniya Pariyāya S** (A 10.205/5:288, 291), SD 39.7; also M 1:390, 3:203; A 372-74, 186, 5:88; Kvu 522.

<sup>16</sup> Elsewhere (in other eds & suttas), vl *vivattayī*.

<sup>17</sup> This underscored sentence is stock referring to the attainment of arhathood: M 2/1:112 (Sabb’āsava S), M 20/- 1:112 (Vitakka,saṅṭhāna S); S 36.3/4:205 (Pahāna S), S 36.5/4:207 (Daṭṭhabba S), S 44.9/4:399 (Kutūhala,sālā S); A 3.33/1:134 (Kamma Nidāna S), A 4.177/2:165 ((Dhātu) Rāhula S), A 4.254/2:249 ((Arahata) Māluṅkya,putta S), A 5.200/3:246 (Nissaraṇīya S), A 6.105/3:444 (Bhava S), A 6.106/3:445 (Taṇhā S), A 7.7/4:7 (Pahāna S), A 7.12/4:9 (Anusaya S 2); It 45 (Vedanā S 2). On **abhisamaya**, see S:B 729 n13.

<sup>18</sup> M 1,12,5 = S 4:205,18, 207,14, 399,12 = It 47,11; A 3:246,24, 4:8,16. See CPD 1:237fg for other citations.

#### 4.2 This ending is not found in the Chinese Āgama version. Analayo makes this remark here:

This proposition does in fact seem somewhat abrupt, and on reading it one could almost have the impression as if mere control of thoughts will automatically lead to full awakening. A closer inspection of this Pāli passage reveals that “the overcoming of craving, the fetters and conceit, together with making an end of *dukkha*” [*acchechi taṇhaṃ, vāvattayi saṃyojanaṃ sammā mānābhisamayā antam akāsi dukkhassa*] are formulated in the past tense, whereas the ability to think whatever one wants to think [*yaṃ vitakkaṃ n’ākaṅkhissati na taṃ vitakkaṃ vitakkessati*] is in the future tense. If however the making an end of *dukkha* were to be the result of being able to control one’s thoughts, then the usage of the tenses should have been exactly the opposite to the way the passage reads now. This suggests that this passage may not originally have belonged here, but for some reasons came to be added as a conclusion to the Vitakkasaṅḥāna Sutta.

The same passage occurs also at the end of **the Sabb’āsava Sutta** [M 2]. In this case, however, the actions leading to the overcoming of craving, the fetters and conceit, and the making an end of *dukkha* are both in the past tense, [19] so that from a grammatical view point the passage does fit its context. The same passage occurs also in two Chinese parallels to the Sabb’āsava Sutta,<sup>20</sup> confirming that whereas in the case of the Vitakkasaṅḥāna Sutta this passage appears to be spurious, in the case of the Sabb’āsava Sutta it fits the context.

(Analayo 2005:70 at M 1:122; amplified & highlighted)

#### 4.3 ALTERNATE VERSIONS

**4.3.1** There is an alternative explanation of the **Sutta conclusion**. Let us look closer at this crucial sentence again (note **the future tense**):

*Yaṃ vitakkaṃ ākaṅkhissati, taṃ vitakkaṃ vitakkessati. Yaṃ vitakkaṃ n’ākaṅkhissati, na taṃ vitakkaṃ vitakkessati.*

He will think only the thought that he wants to think; he will not think the thought that he does not want to think, [§8]

On a simple grammatical level, we can take this sentence as being in the future tense, referring to an action that has not yet occurred. Instead of the future tense, **the present tense** may be used here, giving a simpler immediate effect:

*\*Yaṃ vitakkaṃ ākaṅkhati, taṃ vitakkaṃ vitakketi. Yaṃ vitakkaṃ n’ākaṅkhati, na taṃ vitakkaṃ vitakketi.*

He thinks only what he wishes to think; he does not think what he wishes not to think.

**4.3.2** However, if this present-tense sentence were used, then its sense would be that the 5 methods taught here *will* certainly lead to arhathood (but this is not the case). However, the reading as we have it (in the future tense) means that the practitioner *will* be able to disregard unwanted thoughts and guide his mind, but more is needed (such as concentration, etc). In one who has fully mastered his thoughts, so that the mental hindrances no more arise, with a mind habitually free of defilements, his mind fully focused, it can be said that

<sup>19</sup> *Āsavā ... pahīnā honti...acchechi taṇhaṃ vāvattayi saṃyojanaṃ sammā mānābhisamayā antam akāsi dukkhassa* (M 2,22/1:12).

<sup>20</sup> MĀ 10 = T1.432c26 & T31 = T1.814b2.

*Acchechi taṅhaṃ, vāvattayi saṃyojanaṃ sammā mānābhisamayā antam akāsi dukkhassa.*  
He has cut off craving, discarded the fetters, penetrated conceit and made an end of suffering. [§8]

However, since this stock passage is missing from the Madhyama Āgama version, it is possible that it was added later on to the ending of the Pali version.

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## Vitakka Saṅṭhāna Sutta

### The Discourse on the Stilling of Thoughts

M 20

1 Thus have I heard.

At one time the Blessed One was staying in Anāthapiṇḍika’s park in Jeta’s grove near Sāvattḥī. There the Blessed One addressed the monks, thus:

“Bhikshus!”

“Bhante,” [119] the monks replied in assent to the Blessed One.

The Blessed One said:

2 “Bhikshus, when a monk is devoted to the higher mind [meditation],<sup>21</sup> he should from time to time<sup>22</sup> turn his attention to **5 signs** [mental objects].<sup>23</sup> What are the five?

#### (1) Thought displacement

3 <sup>24</sup>Here, bhikshus, when a monk<sup>25</sup> is attending to some sign [mental object],<sup>26</sup> on account of which there arise in him bad unwholesome thoughts connected with desire,<sup>27</sup> connected with hate<sup>28</sup> or connected with delusion;<sup>29</sup>

<sup>21</sup> The higher mind (*adhicitta*), according to MA 2:87, so called because it is higher than the ordinary wholesome mind of the 10 wholesome courses of action (avoidance of killing, stealing, sexual misconduct; avoidance of lying, slandering, harsh speech, useless talk; unselfishness, good-will, right views, D 3:269, 290; M 9, 41; A 10.28, 176; explained in M 114, Comy to M 9, DhsA:PR 126 ff). It is the mind of the 8 meditative attainments (4 form dhyanas and 4 formless dhyanas) used as the basis for insight. In simple terms, it means simply “meditation.”

<sup>22</sup> *Kālena kalaṃ*, “from time to time.” Comy: These 5 methods should be applied only when any imperfection (*upakkileśa*) arises during his meditation, not otherwise (MA 2:87). See V 1:303,15; D 1:74,24, DA 218,15 f; M 1:119,-4; UA 203,5; PvA 151,5. [1.2]

<sup>23</sup> “Signs,” *nimitta*, which Comy glosses as *kāraṇāni*, “causes (physical or mental)” (MA 2:87), meaning any mental sign or object that catches or holds our attention: see **Nimitta and anuvyañjana**. Both M 20 and its Chin Āgama version (MĀ 101) agree on referring to these 5 methods as “signs” (*nimitta*) (M 1:119,3) 相 (*xiàng*). Clearly, this refers to the sense-objects or “bases (*āyatana*), that is, the 6 sense-objects or objects presented at the 6 sense-doors, namely, eye-object (visual form), ear-object (sound), nose-object (smell), tongue-object (taste), body-object (touch), mind-object (thoughts etc)” (D 1:70). Of course, in meditation, mind-objects would be the most common “signs” that arise as the meditator tries to focus his mind on his meditation object. On defs of *nimitta*, see SD 13.1 (3.1.4) & **Nimitta**, SD 19.7.

<sup>24</sup> *Idha bhikkhave bhikkhuno yaṃ nimittaṃ āgamma yaṃ nimittaṃ manasikaroto uppajjanti pāpakā akusalā vitakkā chandūpasamhitā’pi dosūpasamhitā’pi mohūpasamhitā’pi.*

then, bhikshus, that monk should turn his attention away from those signs, (turning) to **a different sign** connected with the wholesome.<sup>30</sup>

3.2 By attending to **a different sign** connected with the wholesome, those bad unwholesome thoughts, *connected with desire, connected with hate, connected with delusion, are abandoned, they disappear.*

Just by abandoning them, the mind indeed stands firm internally, settles down, becomes unified and concentrated.

#### PARABLE OF THE PEGS

3.3 Bhikshus, just as **a skilled carpenter** or a carpenter's apprentice, were to remove a large peg with a fine one, would push it out, pull it out;<sup>31</sup>

even so, bhikshus, when that monk is attending to those signs, *on account of which there arise in him bad unwholesome thoughts connected with desire, connected with hate, connected with delusion*, then, bhikshus, that monk should turn his attention away from those signs, (turning) to **a different sign** connected with the wholesome.

3.4 Bhikshus, by turning his attention away from those signs, (turning) to a different sign connected with the wholesome, *those bad unwholesome thoughts, connected with desire, connected with hate, connected with delusion, are abandoned, they disappear.*

Just by abandoning them, the mind indeed stands firm internally, settles down, becomes unified and concentrated.

<sup>25</sup> Here "a monk" (*bhikkhu*) may refer to either an ordained monastic or anyone who is meditating (here, doing satipatthana) (DA 3:756; MA 1:241; VbhA 216 f; cf SnA 251). See SD 13.1 (3.1.1).

<sup>26</sup> *Nimitta*, see above §2 n.

<sup>27</sup> For thoughts connected with desire for living beings, the reflection of the 32 parts of the body should be used; when the desire is towards inanimate objects, one should reflect on the ownerlessness or on the impermanence of things.

<sup>28</sup> For thoughts connected with hate for living beings, apply the cultivation of lovingkindness, of compassion, or equanimity, and the ownership of karma (**Āghāta Paṭivīnaya S 1**, A 5.161/3:203), SD 39.6. Or, one could reflect on the parable of the saw (**Kakacūpama S**, M 21,20/1:129), SD 38.1. For hatred towards inanimate things, the analysis of the elements (*dhātu, vavatthāna*) should be applied: see **Mahā Hatthi, padōpama S** (M 28,6-27/1185-191), SD 6.16; **Mahā Rāhu'ovada S** (M 62,8-17/1:421-426), SD 3.11; and **Dhātu Vibhaṅga S** (M 140,13-18/3:240-242), SD 4.17.

<sup>29</sup> For thoughts connected with delusion (*moha, dhātu*), one has to build up the 5 "Dharma supports" (*dhammūpanissaya*): (1) guidance of a teacher (*garu, saṃvāsa*); (2) intent on learning the Dharma (*uddesa*); (3) intent on inquiring into the meaning of doctrines learnt (*uddiṭṭha, paripucchana*); (4) listening to the Dharma at proper times (*kālena dhamma-s, savana*); (5) inquiry into what are and are not the causes (*ṭhānāṭṭhāna, vinicchaya*) (MA 2:89).

<sup>30</sup> *Tena, bhikkhave, bhikkhunā tamhā nimittā aññam nimittam manasi kātabbam kusalūpasamhitam.*

<sup>31</sup> *Seyyathā'pi bhikkhave dakkho palagaṇḍo vā palagaṇḍ'antevāsī vā sukhumāya āṇiyā oḷārikam āṇim abhinhaneyya abhinīhareyya abhinivatteyya* [Ee Ce *abhinivajjeyya*]. Gerundives (fut passive part): *abhinhaneyya*, "should be removed" (from *abhinīhanati*, "to expel, remove, knock out"); *abhinīhareyya*, "should push out" (from *abhinīharati*, "to pull out, draw out (*āṇim*)"); *abhinivatteyya*, "should take out" (from *abhinivatteti*, "to remove, take out"). On gerundives (FPP), see Dhammajoti, *Reading Buddhist Pali Texts*, 2018: Lesson 8.

## (2) Aversion therapy

4 Bhikshus, when<sup>32</sup> that monk, turning away from those signs, is paying attention to a different sign connected with the wholesome, there still<sup>33</sup> arise in him bad unwholesome thoughts,

*connected with desire, connected with hate, connected with delusion,*

then, bhikshus, that monk **should examine the disadvantage [the danger] of those thoughts**, thus:<sup>34</sup> ‘These thoughts are unwholesome, these thoughts are blameworthy, these thoughts fruit in suffering.’<sup>35</sup>

4.2 By his examining **the disadvantage** of those thoughts, those bad unwholesome thoughts,

*connected with desire, connected with hate, connected with delusion, are abandoned, they disappear.*

*Just by abandoning them, the mind indeed stands firm internally, settles down, becomes unified and concentrated.*

### PARABLE OF THE WELL-DRESSED

4.3 Bhikshus, just as a woman or a man, a youth or a maiden,<sup>36</sup> **well-dressed and fond of ornaments**, would feel troubled, ashamed, disgusted<sup>37</sup> by a snake carcass, a dog carcass, or a human carcass [120] hung around the neck;<sup>38</sup>

even so, bhikshus, when that monk, turning away from those signs, is paying attention to that different sign connected with the wholesome,

*there still arise in him bad unwholesome thoughts,*

*connected with desire, connected with hate, connected with delusion;*

then, bhikshus, *that monk should get rid of the bad unwholesome thoughts*

*by examining the disadvantage of those thoughts, thus:*

*These thoughts are unwholesome, these thoughts are blameworthy, these thoughts fruit in suffering.’<sup>39</sup>*

<sup>32</sup> “When that ... ,” *tassa ce* [§§4.1, 5.1, 6.1, 7.1, 8.1]. *Ce* is usu tr as “if,” implying uncertainty, but may here be taken as an emphatic; whereas *tassa* (gen) indicates time. Hence, “when” (or “while”) fits the English context better here, and in all the phrase’s occurrences; eg *tassa bhikkhuno nikkhante*, “when the monk had gone out” (V 1:87,14).

<sup>33</sup> *Eva*.

<sup>34</sup> This and foll lines: *tena bhikkhave bhikkhunā tesam vitakkānam ādīnavo upaparikkhitabbo – ‘iti’p’ime vitakkā akusalā, iti’p’ime vitakkā sāvajjā, iti’p’ime vitakkā dukkha, vipākāti*.

<sup>35</sup> This method was used by the Bodhisattva as recorded in **Dvedhā, vitakka S** (M 19,3-5). Reflecting on the unworthiness of the bad thoughts arouses a sense of shame (*hiri*); reflecting on their dangerous consequences arouses the fear of bad karma (*ottappa*) (A 1:51; It 36).

<sup>36</sup> *Itthī vā puriso vā daharo yuvā*, as at V 2:255, 3:68; **Sāmañña, phala S** (D 2,92/1:80); **Mahā Sakul’udāyi S** (M 77,-19,31/2:19), **Ākañheyya S** (M 5/1:32), **Vitakka Saṅḥāna S** (M 20/1:119); **Jātaka Nidāna, kathā** (J 1:5).

<sup>37</sup> *Aṭṭiyāti harāyati jigucchati*: see **Nibbidā**, SD 20.1 (2.3).

<sup>38</sup> *Seyyathā’pi bhikkhave itthī vā puriso vā daharo yuvā maṇḍanaka, jātiko ahi, kuṇapena vā kukkura, kuṇapena vā manussa, kuṇapena vā kaṅṭhe āsattena aṭṭiyeyya harāyeyya jiguccheyya*. Cf the parable of the young person who loves grooming himself: **Parihāna S** (A 10.55,6.1), SD 43.5.

<sup>39</sup> *Iti p’ime vitakkā akusalā, iti p’ime vitakkā sāvajjā, iti p’ime vitakkā dukkha, vipākā ti*. This passage gives a clear hint that **aṭṭiyāti** refers to the practitioner’s response to the unwholesomeness of a thought, **harāyati** to its blame-worthiness, and **jigucchati** to its resulting in suffering. Cf this passage from **Vīṇā S** (S 35.246): “Bhikshus, if desire, or lust, or hatred, or delusion, or aversion, should arise in any monk or nun in regard to forms (feelings ... perceptions ... formations ... consciousness) cognizable by the eye (the ear ... the nose ... the tongue ... the body ... the mind), such a one should restrain the mind (citta) from them thus: ‘This path is fearful, dangerous, thorny, thickly tangled, a wrong path, a bad path, beset by scarcity. This is a path taken by mean people, and it is not a path taken by worthy persons. You do not deserve this.’” (S 35.246/4:195), SD 17.8a (1.2)(3). For similar sutta analogies, see A 9.11/4:376, V 3:68.



4.4 By his **examining the disadvantage of those thoughts**,  
*those bad unwholesome thoughts,*  
*connected with desire, connected with hate, connected with delusion, are abandoned, they disappear.*  
*Just by abandoning them, the mind indeed stands firm internally, settles down, becomes unified and concentrated.*

### (3) Non-attention<sup>40</sup>

5 Bhikshus, when<sup>41</sup> that monk is examining the disadvantage of those thoughts,  
*there still arise in him bad unwholesome thoughts,*  
*connected with desire, connected with hate, connected with delusion,*  
 then, **he should not mind those thoughts, he should disregard them.**<sup>42</sup>

5.2 Not minding those thoughts, disregarding them, *those bad unwholesome thoughts, connected with desire, connected with hate, connected with delusion, are abandoned, they disappear.*  
*Just by abandoning them, the mind indeed stands firm internally, settles down, becomes unified and concentrated.*

#### PARABLE OF ONE WITH GOOD EYES

5.3 Bhikshus, just as **a man with (good) eyes**, not wishing to see sights around him [within his visual range], would shut his eyes or look away elsewhere,<sup>43</sup>  
 even so, bhikshus, when *that monk examining the disadvantage of those thoughts*,  
*there still arise in him bad unwholesome thoughts,*  
*connected with desire, connected with hate, connected with delusion,*  
 then, bhikshus, *that monk should get rid of those thoughts by not minding them, by disregarding them.*<sup>44</sup>

5.4 By his **not minding those thoughts, disregarding them**, *those bad unwholesome thoughts, connected with desire, connected with hate, connected with delusion, are abandoned, they disappear.*  
*Just by abandoning them, the mind indeed stands firm internally, settles down, becomes unified and concentrated.*

### (4) Thought reduction<sup>45</sup>

6 Bhikshus, when<sup>46</sup> that monk is not minding those thoughts, disregarding them,  
*there still arise in him bad unwholesome thoughts,*

<sup>40</sup> Or, avoidance.

<sup>41</sup> See n on “when that” [§4.1].

<sup>42</sup> *Tena bhikkhave bhikkhunā tesam vitakkānam asati, amanasikāro āpajjitabbo.* Cf **Āghāta Paṭivinaya S 1** (A 5.-161/3:186) where it is one of the 5 methods for putting away ill will. Comy suggests 5 other methods for disregarding distracting thoughts: (1) Occupy oneself with something else; (2) recite some work explaining a doctrine; (3) read a Dharma text (like a pūjā book); (4) examine the parts of an object from his bag, like fire-sticks (“this is the upper stick; this is the lower stick”); (5) carefully and reflectively examine his requisites (“this is the awl; this is a pair of scissors; this is the nail cutter; this is the needle”); (6) darn the worn-out parts of the robe. (MA 3:90 f).

<sup>43</sup> *Seyyathā’pi bhikkhave cakkhumā puriso āpātha, gatānam rūpānam adassana, kāmo assa; so nimīleyya vā aññena vā apalokeyya. Āpātha, gata,* “come within (visual) range,” ie, within one’s field of perception.

<sup>44</sup> This line + §5.4 (follow Ce) but are missing from other MSS: *tena bhikkhave bhikkhunā tesam vitakkānam asati amanasikāro āpajjitabbo. Tassa tesam vitakkānam asati amanasikāram āpajjato ye pāpakā akusalā vitakkā chandūpasamhitā’pi dosūpasamhitā’pi mohūpasamhitā’pi, te pahiyanti te abbattham gacchanti, tesam pahānā ajjhatam eva cittam santiṭṭhati sannisīdati ekodi hoti samādiyati.*

<sup>45</sup> Or, mental analysis.

<sup>46</sup> See n on “when that” [§4.1].

connected with desire, connected with hate, connected with delusion,  
then, bhikshus, **the stilling of thought-formations**<sup>47</sup> for those thoughts should be minded by that monk [by noting the causes of those thoughts].<sup>48</sup>

6.2 By his **stilling of thought-formations** for those thoughts,  
those bad unwholesome thoughts,

connected with desire, connected with hate, connected with delusion, are abandoned, they disappear.  
Just by abandoning them, the mind indeed stands firm internally, settles down, becomes unified and concentrated.

#### PARABLE OF THE WALKER

6.3 Bhikshus, just as it would occur to a man who is walking fast, thus:

‘Why now am I **walking fast**? Why don’t I walk leisurely?’ So, he **walks leisurely.**

Then, it occurs to him, ‘Why am I walking leisurely? Why don’t I stand?’ So, he **stands.**

Then, it occurs to him, ‘Why am I standing? Why don’t I sit down?’ So, he **sits down.**

Then, it occurs to him, ‘Why am I sitting down? Why don’t I lie down?’ So, he **lies down.**

—Thus, bhikshus, giving up an awkward [grosser] posture, he assumes an easy [subtler] one;<sup>49</sup>

even so, bhikshus, when the monk is not minding those thoughts, disregarding them,  
there still arise in him bad unwholesome thoughts,

connected with desire, connected with hate, connected with delusion,  
then, bhikshus, **the stilling of thought-formations** for those thoughts should be minded by that monk.

6.4 Having minded **the stilling of thought-formations** for those thoughts,  
those bad unwholesome thoughts,

connected with hate, connected with delusion, are abandoned, they disappear.<sup>50</sup>

Just by abandoning them, the mind indeed stands firm internally, settles down, becomes unified and concentrated.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>47</sup> *Vitakka, saṅkhāra, santhānaṃ manasikarato*. This is done by progressively identifying the causes of those negative states. MA explains **saṅkhāra** here as condition, cause or root, and takes the compound to mean “stopping the cause of the thought.” The Chinese Āgama version, MĀ 101 = T1.588b26, however, instructs that one “should use intention and volition to gradually decrease the (unwholesome) thought” 當以思行漸減其念. This is accomplished by investigating the unwholesome thought thus: “What is the cause? What is the cause of its cause?” and so on. MA explains that such an investigation would loosen the mind from the flow of bad thoughts, eventually ending them. This is perhaps the most important and interesting of all the methods; hence, the title of the Sutta. See (2) above.

<sup>48</sup> *Tena bhikkhave bhikkhunā tesam vitakkānaṃ vitakka, saṅkhāra, saṅṭhānaṃ manasikātabbaṃ*. **Daddabha J** (J 322) illustrates this method of going to the root or source of the problem.

<sup>49</sup> All the prec lines here: *Seyyathā’pi bhikkhave puriso sīghaṃ gaccheyya. Tassa evam assa – kiṃ nu kho ahaṃ sīghaṃ gacchāmi? Yaṃ, nūnāhaṃ saṅikaṃ gaccheyyan’ti. So saṅikaṃ gaccheyya. Tassa evam assa – kiṃ nu kho ahaṃ saṅikaṃ gacchāmi? Yaṃ, nūnāhaṃ tiṭṭheyya’nti. So tiṭṭheyya. Tassa evam assa – kiṃ nu kho ahaṃ ṭhito? Yaṃ nūnāhaṃ nisīdeyyan’ti. So nisīdeyya. Tassa evam assa – kiṃ nu kho ahaṃ nisinno? Yaṃ, nūnāhaṃ nipajjeyyan’ti. So nipajjeyya. Evañ hi so bhikkhave puriso oḷārikaṃ oḷārikaṃ iriyā, pathaṃ abhinivajjetvā [Se abhinissajjetvā] sukhumaṃ sukhumaṃ iriyā, pathaṃ kappeyya. Contextual tr: oḷārikaṃ as “awkward”; sukhumaṃ, as “easy.”*

<sup>50</sup> Be, WT: *Evam eva kho, bhikkhave, tassa ce bhikkhuno tesam pi vitakkānaṃ asati, amanasikāraṃ āpajjato up-pajjant’eva pāpakā akusalā vitakkā chandūpasamhitāpi dosūpasamhitāpi mohūpasamhitāpi te pahīyanti te abh-atthaṃ gacchanti*. The underscored is clearly wrong. I have tr according to the contextual flow of the text.

<sup>51</sup> On “thought reduction,” see further **Samāṇa Gadrabha S** (A 3.81), SD 24/10b (2.1.3).

## (5) The last resort: Sustained effort<sup>52</sup>

7 Bhikshus, when<sup>53</sup> that monk is attending to the stilling of thought-formations for those thoughts, *there still arise in him bad unwholesome thoughts,*

*connected with desire, connected with hate, connected with delusion;*

then, bhikshus, **with clenched teeth, the tongue pressing on the palate**,<sup>54</sup> that monk should subdue, restrain, attack the (unwholesome) mind with the (wholesome) mind.<sup>55</sup> [121]

7.2 With **clenched teeth, the tongue pressing on the palate**,  
subduing, restraining, attacking the mind with the mind,

*those bad unwholesome thoughts,*

*connected with desire, connected with hate, connected with delusion, are abandoned, they disappear.*

*Just by abandoning them, the mind indeed stands firm internally, settles down, becomes unified and concentrated.*

### PARABLE OF THE WRESTLERS

7.3 Bhikshus, just as **a strong man holding a weaker man** by the head or by the shoulders, would subdue, restrain, attack him,<sup>56</sup>

even so, bhikshus, when, *in that monk attending to the stilling of thought-formations for those thoughts, there still arise bad unwholesome thoughts,*

*connected with desire, connected with hate, connected with delusion,*

then, bhikshus, that monk, **with clenched teeth, the tongue pressing on the palate**, should subdue, restrain, attack the (bad) mind with the (good) mind.

7.4 *Then, the bad unwholesome thoughts, connected with hate, connected with delusion, are abandoned, they disappear.*

*Just by abandoning them, the mind indeed stands firm internally, settles down, becomes unified and concentrated.*

## Summary

8 Bhikshus,

(1) when a monk is paying attention to some sign,  
and there arise in him *bad unwholesome thoughts connected with desire, connected with hate, connected with delusion,*

then, bhikshus, that monk should, turning away from that sign, attend to **a different sign connected with the wholesome.**

<sup>52</sup> See (1.4).

<sup>53</sup> See n on “when that” [§4.1].

<sup>54</sup> *Dante’bhidantam-ādhāya jivhāya tālum āhacca.* As in **Mahā Saccaka S** (M 36,20/1:242), SD 49.4, **Bodhi Rāja,-kumāra S** (M 85,19/2:93), SD 55.2, and **Saṅgārava S** (M 100,17/2:212), but where it forms the initial practice of the Bodhisattva’s self-mortification, and as it is the *least* severe, is recommended as the *last* of the 5 methods: cf J Bronkhorst, “Self and meditation in Indian Buddhism,” 1998: 12. **Purisa Thāma S** (A 2.1.5/1:50) teaches us not to be content with wholesome mental states and to be unremitting in our “personal effort” to win the spiritual goal. See Intro (1) above. For further discussion, see **Sañcetanika S** (A 10.206), SD 3.9 (6.5).

<sup>55</sup> *Tena bhikkhave bhikkhunā dantēbhidantam-ādhāya jivhāya tālum āhacca cetasā cittam abhiniggaṇhitabbarā abhinippīḷetabbarā abhisantāpetabbarā.*

<sup>56</sup> *Seyyathā’pi bhikkhave balavā puriso dubbala,taram purisam sīse vā gale vā khandhe vā gahetvā abhiniggaṇheyya abhinippīḷeyya abhisantāpeyya.*

By attending to a different sign connected with the wholesome, any such bad unwholesome thoughts are abandoned, they disappear.

Just by abandoning them, the mind indeed stands firm internally, settles down, becomes unified and concentrated.

(2) When the monk is examining **the disadvantage of those thoughts**, *those bad unwholesome thoughts, connected with desire, connected with hate, connected with delusion, are abandoned, they disappear.*

*Just by abandoning them, the mind indeed stands firm internally, settles down, becomes unified and concentrated.*

(3) When the monk **does not mind those thoughts, disregards them**, *those bad unwholesome thoughts, connected with desire, connected with hate, connected with delusion, are abandoned, they disappear.*

*Just by abandoning them, the mind indeed stands firm internally, settles down, becomes unified and concentrated.*

(4) When the monk **stills the thought-formations** of those thoughts, *those bad unwholesome thoughts, connected with desire, connected with hate, connected with delusion, are abandoned, they disappear.*

*Just by abandoning them, the mind indeed stands firm internally, settles down, becomes unified and concentrated.*

(5) When, **with clenched teeth, the tongue pressing on the palate**, one subdues, restrains, attacks the (bad) mind with the (good) mind, *those bad unwholesome thoughts, connected with desire, connected with hate, connected with delusion, are abandoned, they disappear.*

*Just by abandoning them, the mind indeed stands firm internally, settles down, [122] becomes unified and concentrated.*

## Master-minding

8.2 That monk, bhikshus, is called **a master of the thought-paths**.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>58</sup>He will think only the thought that he wants to think; he does *not* think the thought that he does *not* want to think.

He has cut off craving, discarded the fetters,<sup>59</sup> fully penetrated conceit<sup>60</sup> by right understanding, made **an end of suffering**.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>57</sup> *Vasī vitakka,pariyāya,pathesu*; ie a master of the thought-process or master-minder. Cf (**Mahā,purisa**) **Vassa,-kāra S** (A 4.35/2:36), SD 82.19.

<sup>58</sup> These last two sentences: *Yaṃ vitakkaṃ ākaṅkhissati taṃ vitakkaṃ vitakkessati. Yaṃ vitakkaṃ n'ākaṅkhissati na taṃ vitakkaṃ vitakkessati. Acchechi taṅhaṃ, vāvattayi saṃyojanaṃ sammā mānābhisamayā antaṃ akāsi dukkhassa*. See Intro (4) above.

<sup>59</sup> The 10 fetters (*dasa saṃyojana*) (MA 1:87) (breaking which one attains the path) are: (1) personality view (*sakkāya,ditṭhi*), (2) spiritual doubt (*vicikicchā*), (3) attachment to rituals and vows (*sīla-b,bata,parāmāsa*); (4) sensual lust (*kāma,rāga*), (5) repulsion (*paṭigha*); (6) lust for form existence (*rūpa,rāga*), (7) lust for formless existence (*arūpa,rāga*), (8) conceit (*māna*), (9) restlessness (*uddhacca*), (10) ignorance (*avijjā*) (S 5:61, A 5:13, Vbh 377). In some places, no 5 (*paṭigha*) is replaced by ill will (*vyāpāda*). The first 5 are the lower fetters (*orambhāgiya*), and the rest, the higher fetters (*uddham,bhāgiya*). The Abhidhamma gives a slightly different set (not in connection with sainthood), viz, sensual desire (*kāma-c,chanda*), repulsion (*paṭigha*), conceit (*māna*), views (*ditṭhi*), doubt (*vicikicchā*), desire for existence (*bhava,rāga*), attachment to rituals and vows (*sīla-b,bata parāmāsa*), jealousy (*issā*), avarice (*macchariya*) and ignorance (*avijjā*) (Vbh 17). See M:ÑB 2001:42 f.

<sup>60</sup> By means of vision and by getting rid of them, both through penetration (*abhisamaya*) (MA 1:87,4).

8.3 The Blessed One said this. Satisfied, the monks rejoiced in the Blessed One's word.

— evaṃ —

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<sup>61</sup> *Acchechi taṅhaṃ, vāvattayi saṃyojanam sammā mānābhisamayā antam akāsi dukkhassa*. This stock phrase usually refers to the attainment of [arhathood](#) [4]. It is missing from the Madhyama Āgama version. It is possible that it was added later on to the ending of the Pali version.