

# Niddasa,vatthu Sutta

## The Discourse on The Grounds for Commendation

[The complete spiritual training in seven stages]

(Aṅguttara Nikāya 7.18/4:15)

Translated by Piya Tan ©2005

### Introduction

The word *niddasa* is rare and obscure, but its sense is clear from its context in two suttas (the first two listed below). It is found only in the following places:

- |                                    |                     |   |
|------------------------------------|---------------------|---|
| • Niddasa,vatthu Sutta             | A 7.18/4:15         |   |
| • (Sāriputta) Niddasa,vatthu Sutta | A 7.39/4:34-37      |   |
| • Saṅgīti Sutta                    | D 33.2.3(7)/3:252 f |   |
| • Das'uttara Sutta                 | D 34.1.8(9)/3:283   | (called <i>sattā dhammā abhiññeyyā</i> ) <sup>1</sup> |
| • Paṭisambhidā,magga               | Pm 1.3/5            | (called <i>sattā dhammā abhiññeyyā</i> )              |

Only the first two are complete discourses on the word *niddasa*. The rest merely list or mention the seven grounds of commendation.

The word *niddasa* (variant reading *niddesa*) is related to the Sanskrit *nirdeśa*, meaning “pointing out,” and comes from the verb *niddisati* (“distinguishes, points out, explains, designates, defines, expresses, means”).<sup>2</sup> The Pali-English Dictionary (PED) explains *niddasa,vatthu* as “object of distinction or praise” (sv *niddesa*).

**The (Sāriputta) Niddasa,vatthu Sutta** (A 7.39) states that only a monk who “has lived the holy life perfectly pure” is fit to be called *niddasa* (“commendable, distinctive”), whether he has lived for 12, 24, 36, or 48 “rains” (monastic years). Probably, based on this statement, the Commentaries explain *niddasa* is “said of a monk who is *not 20, not 30, not 40, not 50*” (*niddaso bhikkhu nibbāso nittimso niccattāliso nippanñāso ti evaṃ vacana.kāraṇāni*, AA 4:7), and is “a term for that one in my teaching whose mental cankers destroyed” (*mama sāsane khīṇ'āsavass'etaṃ adhivacanaṃ*, DA 3:1040 = AA 4:8)<sup>3</sup>

The seven “grounds for commendation” present a comprehensive framework of the threefold training (*ti,sikkhā*) and is a good introduction to the teaching of the seven purifications (*satta visuddhi*).

Moral training (*sīla,sikkhā*) is covered by (1) and (2); mental training (*samādhi,sikkhā*), by (3)-(5); training in wisdom (*paññā,sikkhā*), by (6); and attaining the path of sainthood, by (7). The seven ground for commendation are found in **the Saṅgīti Sutta** (D 33),<sup>4</sup> **the Niddasa,vatthu Sutta** (A 7.18)<sup>5</sup> and **the (Sāriputta) Niddasa,vatthu Sutta** (A 7.39).<sup>6</sup> Of the key terms in the Niddasa,vatthu Sutta, its Commentary says:

*Tattha idhā ti imasmim sāsane. Sikkhā,samādāne tibba-c,chando hoṭi ti sikkhā-t,taya,-  
pūraṇe balava-c,chando hoti. Āyatiñ ca sikkhā,samādāne avigata,pemo ti anāgate puna,divas'-  
ādīsu pi sikkhā,pūraṇe avigata,pemen'eva samannāgato hoti. Dhamma,nisantīyā ti dhamma,-  
nisāmanāya. Vipassanāy'etaṃ adhivacanaṃ. Icchā,vināye ti taṇhā,vināye. Paṭisallāne ti ekī,-  
bhāve. Vīriy'ārambhe ti kāyika,cetasikassa vīriyassa pūraṇe. Sati,nepakke ti satiyañ c'eva  
nipaka,bhāve. Dīṭṭhi,paṭivedhe ti magga,dassane.*

<sup>1</sup> Here, spelt as *niddesa,vatthu*, and are said to be the “seven things to be directly known” (*sattā dhammā abhiññeyyā*).

<sup>2</sup> See It 122 = Nc 276; Miln 123; DhA 2:59; PvA 87, 217; DhsA 57.

<sup>3</sup> This is an untraced Buddha Word.

<sup>4</sup> D 33.2.3(7)/3:252.

<sup>5</sup> A 7.18/4:15, this sutta.

<sup>6</sup> A 7.39.4/4:36 = SD 19.10.

Here *idha* means “in this Teaching.” *Sikkhā,samādāne tibba-c,chando* means the strong will to fulfill the (threefold) training. *Āyatiñ ca sikkhā,samādāne avigata,pemo* means one who has unfailing (*avigata*, lit “not gone away” or “unrelenting”) love to further fulfill the training in the days to come. *Dhamma,nisantiyā* means carefully attending to dharmas [phenomena]: this is called insight (*vipassanā*). *Īchā,vināye* means pushing away craving. *Paṭisallāne* means the state of being alone [being in spiritual solitude]. *Vīriy’ārambhe* means fully making physical and mental effort. *Sati,nepakke* means the state of being mindful and being prudent. *Diṭṭhi,paṭivedhe* means the vision of the path. (DA 3:1040 = AA 4:8 f)

Below I will attempt to further explain the seven grounds for commendation, expanding on this commentary, and relate them to the seven purifications (*satta,visuddhi*) [1-7]:<sup>7</sup>

### 1 Devotion to the spiritual training

The first ground for commendation is stated as follows: “**One is keenly devoted to undertaking the training, and has unfailing love for such a devotion to continue undertaking the training**” (*sikkhā,-samādāne tibba,chando hoti, āyatiñ ca sikkhā,samādāne avigata,pemo*). According to the Dīgha Commentary,

*sikkhā,samādāne tibba-c,chando* means the strong will to fulfill the three trainings. *Āyatiñ ca sikkhā,samādāne avigata,pemo* means one is endowed with unfailing love to fulfill the training further in the days to come and so on.

The result of this devotion to moral training is the purification of moral virtue (*sīla,visuddhi*). Briefly, this is the unbroken observance of the moral precepts one has undertaken. In the case of a lay person, this refers to the five precepts, or those precepts that a lay person has chosen to keep. In the case of the monastic, says **the Visuddhi,magga**, this refers to “the fourfold purification of moral virtue” (*catu,paṛisuddhi,sīla*), that is,

1. The restraint with regard to the monastic disciplinary code (*pāṭimokkha,samvara,sīla*) (A 5.87, 109, 114; Vbh 244);
2. The restraint of the senses (*indriya,samvara,sīla*) (M 39.8/1:273);
3. The purification of livelihood (*ājīva,paṛisuddhi,sīla*) (M 78.11/2:27);
4. The moral virtue regarding the four requisites (*paccaya,sannissita,sīla*) (M 2.13/1:10).  
(Vism 1.42-161/15-58)

### 2 Devotion to a careful observation of phenomena

The second ground for commendation is when “**one is keenly devoted to making careful observation of phenomena, and has unfailing love for making a careful observation of phenomena**” (*dhamma,nisantiyā tibba,chando hoti, āyatiñ ca dhamma,nisantiyā avigata,pemo*). The term *dhamma,-nisantiyā* means the careful attending to dharmas or phenomena as they arise, stabilize and cease over and over again. This is called insight (*vipassanā*).

This part of the spiritual training comprises the keeping of the mind in the present moment, whether we are meditating or doing our daily routine, that is, beginning stage of mental cultivation.

The complete success of the grounds for commendations (2)-(5), as a progressive set of practice, constitutes the second purification, that is, the purification of the mind (*citta,visuddhi*). This is the overcoming of the five mental hindrances through the attainment of access concentration<sup>8</sup> and the dhyanas.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> The *satta,visuddhi* are given in **Ratha,vinīta Sutta** (M 24.9/1:147 f) and in **Das’uttara S** (D 34.2.2(2)/3:288)

<sup>8</sup> “Access concentration,” *upacāra samādhi*, also tr as “neighbourhood concentration,” is the level of concentration just before one attains dhyana, but which still belongs to the sense-sphere. See **Bhavana S** (A 7.67) = SD 15.1 Intro (5).

### 3 Devotion to pushing away desire

The third ground for commendation is when “**one is keenly devoted to pushing away craving, and has unfailing love for such a devotion to continue pushing away craving**” (*icchā, vinaye tibba, chando hoti, āyatiñ ca icchā, vinaye avigata, pemo*). The term *icchā, vinaye* means pushing away craving. This ground for commendation clearly refers to the famous statement in **the Mahā Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta** (D 22) and **the Mahā Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta** (M 10):

Here, monks, a monk<sup>10</sup> dwells<sup>11</sup> exertive, clearly knowing, mindful,  
 contemplating the body in the body, ...  
 contemplating feelings in the feelings, ...  
 contemplating the mind in the mind, ...  
 contemplating dharmas in the dharmas,  
removing<sup>12</sup> covetousness and displeasure<sup>13</sup> in the world.<sup>14</sup>

Although “covetousness and displeasure” is taken by the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta Commentary to refer to only the first two mental hindrances (*nīvaraṇā*), sensual lust and ill will, in the early Suttas, the dvandva is clearly a synecdoche (or short form) for all the five hindrances (*pañca, nīvaraṇā*) themselves, whose removal leads to mindfulness (*sati*), mental concentration (*samādhi*) and dhyana (*jhāna*).

My own understanding here regarding the naming of the first two mental hindrances as *abhijjhā, domanassa* is to show that with their elimination the other hindrances are eliminated, too—a view confirmed by Brahmavamso.<sup>15</sup> This is further confirmed by the Commentaries:

But here since taking *abhijjhā* includes *kāma-c, chanda*, and taking *domanassa* includes *vyāpāda*, therefore it should be understood that the abandoning of the hindrances is spoken of by indicating the pair that is strong among those items that make up the hindrances.<sup>16</sup>

(DA 3:759 = MA 1:244 = VbhA 220)

### 4 Devotion to spiritual solitude

The fourth ground for commendation is when “**one is keenly devoted to spiritual solitude, and has unfailing love for such a devotion to continue in spiritual solitude**” (*paṭisallāne tibba, chando hoti, āyatiñ ca paṭisallāne avigata, pemo*). The term *paṭisallāne* means the state of being alone in two senses: firstly, physical aloofness from socializing but keeping to one’s mindfulness practice; secondly, and more importantly, is mental aloofness, that is, a mind free from the mental hindrances, represented by the term

<sup>9</sup> See **Sāmañña, phala S** (D 2.75-82/1:73-76) = SD 8.10; also **Mahā Dukkha-k, khandha S** (M 13.32-35/1:89 f) = SD 6.9.

<sup>10</sup> Here “a monk” (*bhikkhu*) may refer to either an ordained monastic or anyone who is meditating (here, doing satipaṭṭhāna) (DA 3:756; VbhA 216 f; cf SnA 251). See **Satipaṭṭhāna Ss** = SD 13 §3.0(ii).

<sup>11</sup> *Ātāpī sampajāno satimā, vineyya loke abhijjhā, domanassaṃ*. Here we find 4 of the 5 spiritual faculties (*pañca, indriya*) in action: see **Satipaṭṭhāna Ss** = SD 13 Intro (4.2).

<sup>12</sup> *Vineyya* can mean “should remove” (as pot, like *vineyya*, Sn 590) or as “having removed” (as ger, like *vina- itvā*, Pm 1:244), and both senses apply in Satipaṭṭhāna S. U Silananda similarly ends the sentence with “removing covetousness and grief in the world” (1990:177); also 1990:22-25. See **Satipaṭṭhāna Ss** = SD 13 Intro (4.2c).

<sup>13</sup> “Covetousness and displeasure,” *abhijjhā, domanassaṃ*, alt trs: “desire and discontent,” “desiring and disliking,” or “longing and loathing.” Walshe (1995:335 & n632) renders it as “hankering and fretting [for the world].” See **Satipaṭṭhāna Ss** = SD 13 Intro (4.2e).

<sup>14</sup> “World” (*loka*). See SD 13 Intro (4.2d).

<sup>15</sup> Personal discussion, 30 March 2003, Singapore.

<sup>16</sup> *Yasmā pan’ettha abhijjhā-h, gahaṇena kāma-c, chando domanassa-g, gahaṇena vyāpādo saṅghaṃ gacchati tasmā nīvaraṇa, pariyaṇa, balava, dhamma, dvaya, dassanena nīvaraṇa-p, pahānaṃ vuttaṃ hoti ti veditabbaṃ*. “The taking of *domanassa* includes *vyāpāda* because all *citta* rooted in aversion is accompanied by unpleasant mental feeling.” (Gethin 2003:50n)

*vineyya* in the **Satipaṭṭhāna Suttas**.<sup>17</sup>

According to Buddhaghosa, the term *vineyya* refers either to “displacement by opposites”<sup>18</sup> (*tad-aṅga vinaya*) or to “removal by suppression” (*vikkhambhana vinaya*),<sup>19</sup> which are presumably the same respectively as “the abandoning by opposites” (*tad-aṅga pahāna*), that is, a temporary removal by deliberate restraint or by insight, and as “the abandoning by suppression” (*vikkhambhana pahāna*), that is, a temporary removal by the attainment of dhyanas. **The Visuddhi, magga** gives a general explanation:

**Vikkhambhana-p, pahāna** is “the suppressing of unwholesome states such as the hindrances by any kind of ordinary concentration.” (Vism 22.111/693)

**Tad-aṅga-p, pahāna** is then abandoning of any state that is to be abandoned by means of whatever factor of knowledge and of insight that is its opposite. (Vism 22.112/693 f)

## 5 Devotion to putting forth effort

The fifth ground for commendation is when “**one is keenly devoted to putting forth effort, and has unfailing love for such a devotion to continue putting forth effort” (*viriy’ārambhe tibba, chando hoti, āyatiñ ca viriy’ārambhe avigata, pemo*). The term *viriy’ārambhe* means making full physical and mental effort. This ground for commendation works very closely with the previous one (that of spiritual solitude). While spiritual solitude is the right condition, putting forth effort is the right mental activity, that is, the overcoming of mental hindrances, and so attaining dhyanas.**

As already mentioned [2], the complete success of grounds of commendations numbers (2)-(5), as a progressive set of practice, constitutes the second purification, that of the purification of the mind (*citta, -visuddhi*), that is, the overcoming of the five mental hindrances through the attainment of access concentration and the dhyanas.

## 6 Devotion to mindfulness and discrimination

The sixth ground for commendation is when “**one is keenly devoted to mindfulness and mental discrimination, and has unfailing love for such a devotion to continue in mindfulness and mental discrimination” (*sati, nepakke tibba, chando hoti, āyatiñ ca sati, nepakke avigata, pemo*). The term *sati, -nepakke* means the state of being prudent and being mindful. The devotion to mindfulness and mental discrimination comprises three of the seven purifications, that is,**

- (3) the purification of view (*ditthi, visuddhi*), that is, the understanding that a living being is nothing but the five aggregates (form, feeling, perception, formations and consciousness), or the six senses and their respective objects;
- (4) the purification by overcoming doubt (*kañkhā, vitarana, visuddhi*), that is, the comprehension of conditions, or the understanding of conditionality (phenomena do not arise from a single cause, but the conjunction of numerous interactive and interdependent internal and external conditions of both body and mind, over the three periods of time);<sup>20</sup> and

<sup>17</sup> See M 10.4.3, 5D.5 = SD 13.

<sup>18</sup> Or, “the removal by the substitution of opposites.”

<sup>19</sup> *Tattha vineyyā ti tad-aṅga, vinayena vā vikkhambhana, vinayena vā vinayitvā*, “**having removed**: having removed by removal by way of (displacing) a particular respect or by removal through suppression.” (DA 3:758 = MA 1:243 = SA 3:180 = VbhA 220 = Pm 1:176 = NettA:Be 97; cf SnA 1:365: *vineyyā ti vinetvā*).

<sup>20</sup> In the previous purification, the meditator contemplates on the interdependence of mind and body in any given experience, but here he broadens his mindfulness to reflect on phenomena as true as regards the past, the present and the future. “In other words,” notes **Gethin**, “the practice moves from the contemplation of the particular to the general, and one begins to see that what is in operation is the universal ‘law’—the law of dependent arising; one begins to see that, just as mind and body are interdependent now in the present, so they have been in the past and so they must be in the future. One sees that mind and body, although existing, have not been created or brought into being out of nothing by some creator God. Thus there is no particular beginning to their existence and no end... His understanding of the teaching has ceased to be purely theoretical and become a matter of direct experience

- (5) the purification by knowledge and vision of the path and the not-path (*maggāmagga,ñāṇa,-dassana,visuddhi*), that is, the correct discrimination between the false path of worldly or mystical ecstasy, and the true experience of insight into impermanence, suffering and not self.<sup>21</sup>

### 7 Devotion to the penetrating of views

The seventh ground for commendation is when “**one is keenly devoted to the penetrating of views, and has unfailing love for such a devotion to continue in the penetrating of views**” (*diṭṭhi,paṭivedhe tibba,chando hoti, āyatiñ ca diṭṭhi,paṭivedhe avigata,pemo*). The term *diṭṭhi,paṭivedhe* means the vision of the path, which comprises the last two purifications, namely:

- (6) The purification by knowledge and vision of the path (*paṭipadā,ñāṇa,dassana,visuddhi*), that is, the progressive series of insight knowledge up to the supramundane path; and  
 (7) The purification of knowledge and vision (*ñāṇa,dassana,visuddhi*), that is, the supramundane path itself.

This is the stage of sainthood and awakening itself.<sup>22</sup>

The relationship between the seven purifications and the seven grounds for commendation are here presented in a schematic diagram:

#### The 7 purifications (*satta visuddhi*)<sup>23</sup>

- (1) The purification of moral virtue (*sīla,visuddhi*)
- (2) The purification of the mind (*citta,visuddhi*)
- (3) The purification of view (*diṭṭhi,visuddhi*)
- (4) The purification by overcoming doubt (*kaṅkhā,vitaraṇa,visuddhi*)
- (5) The purification by knowledge and vision of the path and the not-path (*maggāmagga,ñāṇa,dassana,visuddhi*)
- (6) The purification by knowledge and vision of the path (*paṭipadā,ñāṇa,dassana,visuddhi*)
- (7) The purification of knowledge and vision (*ñāṇa,dassana,visuddhi*)

#### The 7 grounds for commendation (*satta niddasa,vatthu*)

- (1) taking up the training (*sikkhā,samādāna*)
- (2) careful observation of phenomena (*dhamma.nisanti*)
- (3) pushing away desires (*icchā,vinaya*)
- (4) spiritual solitude (*paṭisallana*)
- (5) putting forth effort (*vīriy'ārambha*)
- (6) mindfulness and mental discrimination (*sati,nepakka*)
- (7) the penetrating of views (*diṭṭhi,paṭivedha*)

which cannot be denied. Thus the meditator has crossed over doubt thereby complete the fourth purification to become a ‘lesser attainer of the stream’.” (1998:189 f).

<sup>21</sup> The practitioner may mistakenly conclude that he has reached the end of the path, but as **Gethin** notes, “the meditator may live for many years convinced that he or she has attained arhatship. Only when some experience—like the arising of strong anger or fear—dissuades him or her from this view does the meditator complete the fifth purification of ‘knowing and seeing what is the path and not the path’; the meditator then passes to the sixth purification of ‘knowing and seeing the way’.” (1998:190 f).

<sup>22</sup> For further discussion, see **Bhavana S** (A 7.67) = SD 15.1 Intro (9).

<sup>23</sup> M 24.9/1:147 f = D 34.2.2(2)/3:288.

## The Discourse on The Grounds for Commendation (A 7.18/4:15)

**1** Bhikshus, there are these seven grounds for commendation. What are the seven?

**2** Here, bhikshus,

(1) a monk is keenly devoted to undertaking the training, and has unfailing love for such a devotion to continue undertaking the training;

(2) he is keenly devoted to making a careful observation of phenomena, and has unfailing love for such a devotion to continue making a careful observation of phenomena;

(3) he is keenly devoted to pushing away craving, and has unfailing love for such a devotion to continue pushing away craving;

(4) he is keenly devoted to spiritual solitude, and has unfailing love for such a devotion to continue in spiritual solitude;

(5) he is keenly devoted to putting forth effort, and has unfailing love for such a devotion to continue putting forth effort;

(6) he is keenly devoted to mindfulness and mental discrimination, and has unfailing love for such a devotion to continue in mindfulness and mental discrimination;

(7) he is keenly devoted to the penetrating of views, and has unfailing love for such a devotion to continue in the penetrating of views.

These, bhikshus, are the seven grounds for commendation.

— evaṃ —

### **Bibliography**

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