

Vīṇā Sutta

Vīṇ'opama Sutta

The Discourse on the Veena

Or, the Discourse on the Parable of the Lute
[Training the mind to overcome sense-desires]
(Sāmyutta Nikāya 35.246/4:195)
Translated by Piya Tan ©2009

1 Sense-experience and defilements

The **Vīṇā Sutta** is a short and simple, yet instructive, discourse on body-based mindfulness. It opens with an instruction on how, when we are faced with “desire, or lust, or hatred, or delusion, or aversion” (*chando vā rāgo vā doso vā moho vā paṭigham vā*), we should reflect on *the danger* of being pulled into the maelstrom of the various sense-experiences [§3]. This rare set of five defilements is mentioned again only in the **Piṇḍapāta Pārisuddhi Sutta** (M 151) in the same context.¹

The Vīṇā Sutta Commentary explains that desire (*chanda*) is newly arisen weak craving (*tanhā*) so that we are unable to delight in it; lust (*rāga*) is strong craving arising again and again, so that we delight in it. Similarly, hate (*dosa*) is newly arisen weak anger (*kodha*) which is incapable of violence, etc; aversion (*paṭigha*) is recurring strong anger that leads to violence. Delusion (*moha*) arises on account of confusion (*sammohana*). These five comprise the 3 unwholesome roots (*akusala, mūla*), and when these are included, all the subsidiary defilements are included.²

2 The parables of the Vīṇā Sutta

2.1 THE WATCHMEN. After the Vīṇā Sutta has instructed on sense-restraint in an “explicit” (*nī'thattha*) manner, using Dharma language, it then presents the same instruction in an “implicit” (*neyy'attha*) manner,³ using imagery, that is, the parable of the watchmen. There are two watchmen of a cornfield, one careless, one vigilant.

The careless watchman lets a cow stray into the corn and devour it. This is like not wisely restraining our senses so that they are caught up with five physical sense-pleasures. The corn-eater (*kiṭṭhādo*) is the ensnared mind (*kūṭa, citta*). (SA 3:65)

The vigilant watchman does not let any cow into the corn. When he catches a cow in the corn [§5],

Similes

he takes firm hold of its muzzle
he firmly holds its forelocks
he drubs it with a rod
he releases the cow

The meditator

listens carefully to the teacher's instructions;
he keeps his mind on the meditation object;
he pushes away intruding thoughts;
the mind is free of mental hindrances and enjoys dhyana.

It is interesting to note that the good cornfield watchman is not only *vigilant*, but also *patient*; for, thrice he makes the effort to train the cow so that it never again goes into the corn to destroy it. This sustained effort refers to persistence in mindfulness practice of keeping the mind on the object.

As start, however, to prime the mind for meditation, the Commentary recommends that the meditator pay attention to discourses such as these:

¹ M 151.8/3:294 f = SD 69.1.

² The 5 terms also imply the 12 unwholesome consciousnesses (*citta*). (SA 3:63). The 12 cittas are an Abhidhamma set: see Abhidhamm'attha Saṅgaha (Abhs:SR 82 f = Abhs:WG 11-18 = Abhs:BRS 1:4-7): see (**Akusala, mūla**) **Añña,tiṭṭhiyā S** (A 3.68) = SD 16.4 Intro (1.2).

³ On these 2 teachings, see **Neyy'attha Nī'thattha S** (A 2.3.4-5/1:60) = SD 2.6b.

Anamataggiya Suttas	(S 15.1-10/2:178-186)	Suffering is without beginning nor end.
Devadūta Sutta	(M 130/3:178-187)	The four sights and their meaning.
Āditta Sutta	(S 35.28/4:19 f)	On greed, hate and delusion.
Āsīvisūpama Sutta	(S 35.238/4:172-175)	The 4 elements, the 5 aggregates, liberation.
Anāgatabhaya Suttas	(A 5.77-80/3:100-110)	The decline of the Dharma.

In this connection, Buddhaghosa notes, the Ancients (the early Buddhist elders) says:

<i>Subhāsitaṃ sutvā mano pasīdati</i>	Hearing well-spoken words inspires the mind,
<i>Dameti naṃ pīti, sukhañ ca vindati</i>	it is tamed, and knows zest and happiness.
<i>Tad assa ārammaṇe tiṭṭhate mano</i>	The mind of that person stays on its object,
<i>Goṇo 'va kiṭṭhādako daṇḍa, tājito 'ti</i>	like a corn-eating cow drubbed with a rod.
	(SA 3:65; untraced: attributed to the Ancients)

2.2 THE VEENA'S SOUND. There are at least two parables of the veena (or Indian lute) in the Suttas: the one in **the Sona (Kolivisa) Sutta** (A 6.55) and in **the Vīṇā Sutta** (S 35.246). In the former case, the Buddha advises Soṇa, who strives too hard in his meditation to the point of hurting himself, to properly balance his spiritual faculties, just as a skilled musician properly tunes a veena.⁴ In the latter, the Buddha uses the veena simile to explicate the reflection on the five aggregates [§§6-7].

According to the Saṃyutta Commentary, the five aggregates are like the veena, and the meditator is like the rajah. Just as the rajah, looking for the sound of the veena in its various parts, fails to find it, then loses interest in it, even so the meditator, investigating the five aggregates, does not see any “I,” “me,” or “mine,” to grasp at, and so loses interest in them. In the parable, the rajah in the end, remarks, “It is not only the lute that is a wretched (*lāmikā*) [nothing, *asati*] thing, but this so called lute, and whatever else is bound with strings—all that is just wretched, too.” (SA 3:67).

The three personal terms “I,” “me,” and “mine,” with regards to each of the five aggregates—form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness—refer to the three “graspings” [grips] (*gaha*) of views, craving and conceit, which do not exist in the arhat. There is also wordplay on *asati*, which can mean “wretched” (*lāmikā*), as glossed by the Commentary, or as “lacking mindfulness”—both senses are applicable in the parable.

As Bodhi notes, there is an important difference between the rajah and the meditator, conveyed neither by the Sutta nor the commentary. In the parable, the rajah, looking for the sound of the lute by taking apart the instrument, seems foolish;⁵ but the meditator, investigates the aggregates to dispel the delusion of a self, and so becomes wise.⁶

The Saṃyutta Commentary ends its exegesis with a quotation from the Mahā Aṭṭhakathā (the Great Commentary), no longer extant, thus:

<i>Ādimhi sīlaṃ kathitaṃ</i>	In the beginning, moral virtue is discussed,
<i>majjhe samādhi, bhāvanā</i>	in the middle, the cultivation of concentration,
<i>pariyosāne ca nibbānaṃ</i>	and in the end, nirvana—
<i>esā vīṇōpamā kathā ti</i>	this is how the veena parable is discussed. (SA 3:66)

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⁴ A 6.55/3:374-379 = SD 20.12.

⁵ We are reminded on the well known Aesop's fable of the goose that lays golden eggs. In other versions of this fable (eg, [Avianus 33](http://www.mythfolklore.net/aesopica/oxford/434.htm)), the bird is a goose. In **Suvanna, haṃsa J** (J 136/1:474-477), a bird with golden feathers is plucked bare by its owner; but when the feathers have regrown, the bird flies away never to return. See <http://www.mythfolklore.net/aesopica/oxford/434.htm>. The moral of this fable is that greed seriously limits one's wealth.

⁶ S:B 1430 n217.

The Discourse on the Lute

(S 35.246/4:195-198) [PTS: S 35.205]

- 1 At Sāvattḥī.
2 Then the Blessed One said this:

Dealing with sense-experience

3 (1) “Bhikshus, if desire, or lust, or hatred, or delusion, or aversion,⁷ should arise in a monk or a nun⁸ in regard to forms cognizable by the eye, such a one should restrain the mind from them, thus:⁹

‘This path is fearful, dangerous, thorny, thickly tangled, a wrong path, an evil path, beset by scarcity.¹⁰ This is a path taken by mean people, and it is not a path taken by true individuals. This is not worthwhile for you.’¹¹

In this way, the mind should be restrained from these states regarding form cognizable by the eye.

(2) Bhikshus, if desire, or lust, or hatred, or delusion, or aversion, should arise in any monk or nun in regard to sounds cognizable by the ear, such a one should restrain the mind from them, thus:

‘This path is fearful, dangerous, thorny, thickly tangled, a wrong path, an evil path, beset by scarcity. This is a path taken by mean people, and it is not a path taken by true individuals. This is not worthwhile for you.’

In this way, the mind should be restrained from these states regarding sounds cognizable by the ear.

(3) Bhikshus, if desire, or lust, or hatred, or delusion, or aversion, should arise in any monk or nun in regard to smells cognizable by the nose, such a one should restrain the mind from them, thus:

‘This path is fearful, dangerous, thorny, thickly tangled, a wrong path, an evil path, beset by scarcity. This is a path taken by mean people, and it is not a path taken by true individuals. This is not worthwhile for you.’

In this way, the mind should be restrained from these states regarding smells cognizable by the nose.

(4) Bhikshus, if desire, or lust, or hatred, or delusion, or aversion, should arise in any monk or nun in regard to tastes cognizable by the tongue, such a one should restrain the mind from them, thus:

‘This path is fearful, dangerous, thorny, thickly tangled, a wrong path, an evil path, beset by scarcity. This is a path taken by mean people, and it is not a path taken by true individuals. This is not worthwhile for you.’

In this way, the mind should be restrained from these states regarding tastes cognizable by the tongue.

(5) Bhikshus, if desire, or lust, or hatred, or delusion, or aversion, should arise in any monk or nun in regard to touches cognizable by the body, such a one should restrain the mind from them, thus:

‘This path is fearful, dangerous, thorny, thickly tangled, a wrong path, an evil path, beset by scarcity. This is a path taken by mean people, and it is not a path taken by true individuals. This is not worthwhile for you.’

⁷ *Chando rāgo vā doso vā moho vā paṭighaṃ vā*. On these 5 terms, see Intro (1.1).

⁸ *Bhikkhūṇī*. Apart from the Saṃyutta’s **Mahā,vagga** (S 5), references to nuns are rare in the Saṃyutta; but see **Khīra,rukka S** (S 35.231/4:159-162).

⁹ *Yassa kassaci bhikkhave bhikkhussa vā bhikkhūṇiyā vā cakkhu,viññeyyesu rūpesu uppajjeyya chando rāgo vā doso vā moho vā paṭighaṃ vā pi cetaso tato cittam nivāraye*. For further details on how this can be done, see eg **Nimitta & Vyañjana** = SD 19.14.

¹⁰ **Duhitika**. This is a very simple word: V 3:6 = 7 = 15 = 87 = 4:23 = S 4:323; S 4:195; A 1:160). But its etym seem to have eluded even the great Buddhaghosa, whose confusion is pointed out by Sāriputta in the 12th cent (VAT:Be 1:426,5-18): see **Hinüber** JPTS 9 1981: 75 f. Buddhaghosa analyses *duhitika* as *du-ihiti-ka*, where *ihiti* = *iriyānā* (“moving, fearing”): Along whatever path there is neither food nor drink, such as roots and fruits, the faring there is difficult; one cannot travel on it to reach one’s destination. Similarly, one cannot reach success by taking the path of defilements. (SA 3:106). The correct derivation *du-hita* was apparently lost by the commentarial period. See however SED, sv *dur-hita*, and its antonym, *su-hita* (M 1:30; MA 1:150). See S:B 1450 n347.

¹¹ *Sappurisa,sevito c’eso maggo na c’eso sappurisehi sevito, na tvam etam arahasī ti*.

In this way, the mind should be restrained from these states regarding touches cognizable by the body.

(6) Bhikshus, if desire, or lust, or hatred, or delusion, or aversion, should arise in any monk or nun in regard to mind-objects cognizable by the mind, such a one should restrain the mind from them, thus:

‘This path is fearful, dangerous, thorny, thickly tangled, a wrong path, an evil 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.’

In this way, the mind should be restrained from these states regarding mind-objects cognizable by the mind.

Parable of the careless watchman

4 Suppose, bhikshus, the corn has ripened, and the cornfield watchman is negligent. And a cow that eats corn were to descend upon the cornfield, [196] it would ravenously indulge itself as it likes.¹²

Even so, bhikshus, an uninstructed worldling who shows no restraint towards the six bases for sense-contact indulges himself mindlessly [ravenously] as much as he likes in the five cords of sense-pleasures.¹³

Parable of the vigilant watchman

5a Suppose, bhikshus, the corn has ripened, and the cornfield watchman is vigilant. And the cow that eats corn were to descend upon the cornfield,

the watchman would take a firm hold of his muzzle;

having taken a firm hold of the muzzle, he would firmly hold its forelocks,¹⁴ holding it down;¹⁵

having firmly held its forelocks, holding it down, he would give it a good drubbing with a rod;

having given it a good drubbing with a rod, he would release it.

For the second time, too, bhikshus, the cow that eats corn were to descend upon the cornfield,

the watchman would take a firm hold of his muzzle;

having taken a firm hold of the muzzle, he would firmly hold its forelocks, holding it down;

having firmly held its forelocks, holding it down, he would give it a good drubbing with a rod;

having given it a good drubbing with a rod, he would release it.

For the third time, too, bhikshus, the cow that eats corn were to descend upon the cornfield,

the watchman would take a firm hold of his muzzle;

having taken a firm hold of the muzzle, he would firmly hold its forelocks, holding it down;

having firmly held its forelocks, holding it down, he would give it a good drubbing with a rod;

having given it a good drubbing with a rod, he would release it.

5b Thus, bhikshus, that corn-eating cow, having gone to a village, or to a forest, whether it is used to standing or to sitting down, it would never again descend upon the corn, recalling the touch of the rod the last time.

5c even so, bhikshus, when a monk’s mind has been disciplined, well disciplined,¹⁶ towards the bases of sense-contact, it simply stabilizes inwardly, settles, unifies, concentrates [attains samadhi].¹⁷

¹² Be Ee Se *kiṭṭh’arakkho* [Ce *kiṭṭh’arakkhako*] *ca pamatto, goṇo ca kiṭṭhādo aduṃ kiṭṭham otarivā yāvad attham madam āpajjeyya pamādam āpajjeyya* [Ce Ee omit here & below]. Note that this self-counselling or apocalyptic admonition uses the 2nd person: see (**Gadrabha**) **Samāṇa S** (A 3.81) = SD 24.10b (2.1.3).

¹³ Comy: Just as crop owner’s harvest does not yield due to the cow’s eating the corn on account of the watchman’s negligence, even so, when the mind is separated from the mindfulness that guards the six sense-doors, it enjoys the five cords of sense-pleasures, and when his wholesome qualities are destroyed, the monk fails to gain the fruits of asceticism. (SA 3:64).

¹⁴ *Upari,ghatāyam*, which Comy glosses “in between the two horns” (*dvinnam siṅgānam antare*, SA 3:64).

¹⁵ Cf Tha 446: “If you mind runs after sense-pleasures and existence, | quickly hold it down with mindfulness, as one holds down a bad cow eating corn” (*sace dhāvati te cittam kāmesu ca bhavesu ca | khippam nigganḥa satiyā kiṭṭhādam viya duppasun ti*, Tha 446)

Parable of the veena's sound

6 Suppose, bhikshus, the sound of a veena has never been heard by a rajah or a royal courtier. If he were to hear the sound of a veena, he would say thus:

‘Good man, what now is making that sound so lovely, so desirable, so intoxicating, [197] so enthralling, so captivating?’

They would say this to him:

‘That, bhante, is called a veena, whose sound is so lovely, so desirable, so intoxicating, [197] so enthralling, so captivating.’

He would say to them:

‘Go, sir, and bring me that veena!’

They would bring that veena to him. He would say this:

‘Enough with this veena! Bring me only the sound!’

They would say this to him:

‘This veena, bhante, is made up of many parts, a great many parts.

It sounds when one plays on its diverse parts, that is to say,¹⁶

dependent on the belly	(<i>doni</i>), and
dependent on the parchment sounding board	(<i>camma</i>), and
dependent on the arm	(<i>daṇḍa</i>), and
dependent on the head	(<i>upadhāraṇa</i>), and
dependent on the strings	(<i>tantī</i>), and
dependent on plectrum	(<i>koṇa</i>), and
dependent on proper effort of a person	(<i>purisassa ca tajjāṃ vāyāmaṃ</i>).

So, bhante, this veena is made up of many parts, a great many parts. It sounds on when one plays on its diverse parts.’

The rajah would then break up the lute into ten pieces or a hundred pieces.

Having broken it into ten pieces or a hundred pieces, he reduces them to splinters.

Having reduced them to splinters, he would burn them in a fire, which reduced them to ashes.

Having reduced them to ashes, he would keep winnowing the ashes in a strong wind, or let a swift river-current wash them away.

Then he would say:

‘There is nothing to this so called veena [This veena is wretched], sir, and whatever is here called a veena! The masses are exceedingly heedless; how gullible!’¹⁹

¹⁶ Be *udujitāṃ he sudujitāṃ*; Ce Se *udujitāṃ hoti sudujitāṃ*; Ee *uju,jātāṃ hoti sammuju,jātāṃ*. Comy glosses with “frightened” (*tajjītāṃ*) and “thoroughly frightened” (*sutajjītāṃ*), or “well-conquered” (*sujītāṃ*), and that *udu* and *sudu* are only indeclinables (*nipāta,mattam eva*) (SA 3:66). CPD, sv *uducita*, *udu(j)jita*, *udajjita*, *udājita*, *uduta*, *udupatacitta* (all marked as corrupt readings): **Bodhi**, too, thinks that “all the texts are corrupted here” (S:B 1430 n214). The best reading is prob *udājita*, “driven out; scared (away); disciplined, trained,” & *sūdājita* (S 4:196,23): see **O von Hinuber** 1979: 819-822; sv, DP: *udājita* is pp of **udājati* or **udājeti* (*ud* + *ā*² + *ajati*).

¹⁷ *Evam eva kho, bhikkhave, yato kho bhikkhuno chasu phass’āyatanesu cittāṃ udājitāṃ hoti sūdājitāṃ, ajjhat-tam eva santiṭṭhati sannisīdati ekodi hoti samādhiyati*. Comy explains that *santiṭṭhati* refers to the attaining of the 1st dhyana, *sannisīdati* to the 2nd dhyana, *ekodi hoti* to the 3rd dhyana, and *samādhiyati* to the 4th dhyana; or, they all could refer to the 1st dhyana. Thus to this extent, says Comy, the Buddha expounds the guarding of calm and the moral virtue of the restraint of the sense-faculties (*samathānurakkhaṇa,indriya,samvara,sīla*) (SA 3:66).

¹⁸ The component names are found in Coomaraswamy 1930, quoted by IB Horner at Miln:H 74 (Miln 53).

¹⁹ *So evaṃ vadeyya “asatī kirāyaṃ, bho, vīṇā nāma, yath’evaṃ yaṃ [Ce yath’evāyaṃ; Ee yath’ev’ayaṃ] kiñci vīṇā nāma ettha ca paṇāyaṃ jano [Ke Se ettha paṇāyaṃ jano; Ee Ke ettha ca mahā,jano] ativelāṃ pamatto palālita’ti*. PED resolves *palālita* as *pa* + *lalita*; at A 5.7/3:5, we have *palālita* (v1 *lalitā*), in *kāmesu ~ā*, “find delight in (or taken in) by pleasure.” Comy glosses *asati* with *lāmikā* (f, “wretched”): “It is not only the lute that is a wretched thing, but this so called lute, and whatever else is bound with strings—all that is just wretched, too.” (SA 3:66)

The range of the aggregates

7	Even so, bhikshus, a monk investigates ²⁰	<u>form</u>	to the extent of form's occurrence; ²¹
	he investigates	<u>feeling</u>	to the extent of feeling's occurrence;
	he investigates	<u>perception</u>	to the extent of perception's occurrence;
	he investigates	<u>formations</u>	to the extent of formations' occurrence;
	he investigates	<u>consciousness</u>	to the extent of consciousness' occurrence.
	On account of his investigating of	<u>form</u>	to the extent of form's occurrence,
	on account of his investigating of	<u>feeling</u>	to the extent of feeling's occurrence,
	on account of his investigating of	<u>perception</u>	to the extent of perception's occurrence,
	on account of his investigating of	<u>formations</u>	to the extent of formations' occurrence,
	on account of his investigating of	<u>consciousness</u>	to the extent of consciousness' occurrence,
	whatever notions of 'I' or 'mine' or 'I am' there <i>had occurred</i> to him <i>no longer occurs</i> to him." ²²		

— evaṃ —

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090514; 090519; 090610; 090831 ds

²⁰ Be *samanvesati*; Ce Se Ke *samannesati*; Ee *samanesati*.

²¹ *Gati* (lit "going") usu means "course, destiny," as in "what is his destiny or future state" (*tassa kā gati ko abhisamparāyo*, M 1:388), also D 2:91; A 1:122. Here, *gati* has the sense of "behavior, state, living condition, sphere of existence," as in "the quality of ignorance" (*avijjāy'eva gati*, Sn 29); "the animals' sphere is the forest, the birds' sphere is the sky, cessation is the sphere of phenomena, the arhat's sphere is nirvana" (*gati migānaṃ pavānaṃ, ākaso pakkhīnaṃ gati, vibhavo gati dhammānaṃ, nibbānaṃ arahato gati*, V 5:149 = SnA 346)

²² On self-notions, see **I: The nature of identity** = SD 19.1' **Me: The nature of conceit** = SD 19.2a; **Mine: The nature of craving** = SD 19.3.