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Yoniso Manasikāra Sampadā Sutta

The Discourse on the Accomplishment of Wise Attention

PTS: **Yoniso Sutta** The Discourse on Being Wise

Theme: The internal condition for the noble eightfold path | S 45.55/5:31

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1 Sutta highlights

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

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

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

2 Unwise attention and wise attention

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

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

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

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

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

¹ S 45.49/5:29 f = SD 34.11.

² See **Upaḍḍha S** (S 45.1) @ SD 34.9 (3).

³ See **Viveka, nissita** = SD 20.4.

⁴ **Mahā Vedalla S** (M 43.13/1:294) = SD 35.1; A 2.11.7/1:87.

⁵ See **Anusaya** = SD 31.3 (5).

⁶ Vbh 936/373; MA 1:64.

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

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

On a deeper mental level, as explained in **the (Āhāra) Kāya Sutta** (S 46.2), unwise attention gives rise to the five mental hindrances—sensual desire, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and remorse, and doubt—which prevent us from attaining samadhi, that is, meditative mental focus, or any kind of wholesome attention.⁸ In short, we are hindered from our mental development.⁹

Unwise attention, in other words, is based on *ignorance*, which starts off the dependent arising of mental formations (*sankhāra*), which are karmic activities, and these lead on to a whole mass of suffering,¹⁰ and the prolonging of the samsaric cycle (*vaṭṭa*) (MA 1:64 f). In short, unwise attention is the root of samsaric existence. Unwise attention is food for a lack of mindfulness and full awareness, which in turn increase ignorance and craving.

2.2 WISE ATTENTION

2.2.1 Definition. There are two ways in which right view arises, that is, through listening to others (*parato ghosa*) and through wise attention (*yoniso manasi,kāra*).¹¹ **The Aṅguttara Commentary** explains *parato ghosa* in the context of giving rise to right view as that of “hearing the true Dharma” (*saddhamma,savana*) (AA 2:157).

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

2.2.2 Etymology and usage. Let us now look at how the term *yoniso manasikāra* is formed so that we have a better understanding of its meaning. “Wise” (*yoniso*) comes from *yonī*, meaning “the womb, origin (place of birth).” As such, *yoniso* means “down to its origin or foundation” (PED), that is to say, going down to the roots of reality.¹² In practice, this refers to what is impure as impure, what is painful as painful, what is not self as not self, and what is foul as foul¹³ [2.1], that is, to see things as they really are.

“Attention” (*manasi,kāra*), according to the Abhidhamma, is the very first stage of the mind’s encounter with an object,¹⁴ and it holds the associated mental factors to the object.¹⁵ As such, it is a promin-

⁷ See **Vipallāsa S** (A 4.49/2:52; Vism 22.68/685) = SD 16.11; **Satipaṭṭhāna Ss** = SD 13.1 (4.1a).

⁸ S 46.2/5:64 f = SD 62.9.

⁹ See **Nīvaraṇa** = SD 32.1.

¹⁰ See **Nīvaraṇa Pahāna S** (A 1.2.1-5/1:3 f) = SD 16.3; see also **(Āhāra) Kāya S** (S 46.2/5:64 f) = SD 62.9 & **(Āhāra) Avijjā S** (A 10.61/5:113-116) = SD 31.10.

¹¹ **Mahā Vedalla S** (M 43.13/1:294) = SD 35.1; A 2.11.8/1:87.

¹² See Tha 158, where *yoniso* means “rightly” and where Comy glosses as “through skillful means and rightly by way of calm and insight” (*upāyena ñāyena samma-d-eva samatha,vipassanāya*, ThaA 2:33). Also: “one should wisely [rightly] examine a mental state” (*yoniso vicine dhammam*) (M 143.17/3:62* = S 158/1.48/1:34* = A 7.3/-4:3*; MA 5:81 = SA 1:89; AA 4.1) = *yoṇiśa viyiṇi dhama* (Dh:G 244 = Dh:G(B) 158).

¹³ See **Nīvaraṇa Pahāna Vagga** (A 1.2) = SD 16.3 Intro (6).

¹⁴ Wise attention, then, allows us to detect an unwholesome “sign” (*nimitta*), not to drawn to it, so that our mind does not proliferate unwholesomely: see **Nimitta & vyañjana** = SD 19.14.

ent factor in two specific classes of consciousness, that is, advertence (*āvajjana*) at the five-sense doors and at the mind-door. These two states of consciousness, breaking through into the life continuum (*bhavāṅga*), form the first stage of the perceptual process (*citta, vīthi*).¹⁶

Yoniso manasikāra, as such, means “directing the attention to the roots of things,” that is, observing phenomena as they truly are, as being characterized by impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and not-self. The term frequently appears in the suttas in the sense of “wise attention, wise reflection.” **The Sabb’āsava Sutta** (M 2), for example, prescribes wise attention as one of the ways for abandoning mental influxes (*āsava*). There it is called “wise reflection” (*paṭisaṅkhā yoniso*), and directed to the proper use of the basic requisites of clothing, food, shelter and medicine, so that “there are no influxes, vexation or fever for him from reflective use.”¹⁷

2.2.3 Benefits of wise attention. **The Mahā Vedalla Sutta** (M 43) says that wise attention fuels mindfulness and full awareness, which in turn, are the conditions for the arising of right view.¹⁸ All this in turn nurture the awakening-factors,¹⁹ and in due course fruits in streamwinning.²⁰ In other words, wise attention is conducive to good meditation and the attaining of streamwinning. On a higher level, **the Sekha Sutta 1** (It 1.2.6) declares that wise attention is of great assistance (*bahūpakāra*) to the learner (*sekha*), that is, the saints of the path, short for the arhat, for the total ending of suffering.²¹

The Yoniso Manasikāra Sampadā Sutta, using the beautiful imagery of dawn as the harbinger of sunrise, points to how wise attention precedes, that is, leads on to the arising of the noble eightfold path [§§2-3]. In fact, **the Kalyāṇa, mitta Sutta 1** (S 45/48) uses the same imagery for spiritual friendship, which is said to bring about the noble eightfold path.²²

That a common imagery of dawn as the harbinger of sunrise applies both to wise attention and to spiritual friendship is highly significant. It reflects the true nature of spiritual friendship as the interaction between teacher and pupil for the sake of mental cultivation based on wise attention. Wise attention, as we have seen, also applies to our daily lives as “wise reflection” (*paṭisaṅkhā yoniso*) [2.2.2]. Wise attention, in short, is usefully both for our meditation and daily life.

¹⁵ “*Manasi, kāra* should be distinguished from *vitakka*: while the former turns its concomitants towards the object, the latter applies them onto the object. *Manasikāra* is an indispensable cognitive factor present in all states of consciousness; *vitakka* is a specialized factor which is not indispensable to cognition.” (Abhs:BRS 2.2(7) (Guide).

¹⁶ On the perceptual process, see **Madhu, piṇḍika S** (M 18.15-19/1:11-113) & SD 6.14(4). See also Vism 14.152/466 & **The unconscious** = SD 17.8b(5).

¹⁷ M 2.13-17/1:10 = SD 30.3 (2.1.3). “Mental influxes,” *āsava*. The term *āsava* (lit “cankers”) comes from *ā-savati*, meaning “flows towards” (ie either “into” or “out” towards the observer). It has been variously tr as cankers, taints (“deadly taints,” RD), corruptions, intoxicants, biases, depravity, misery, evil (influence), or simply left untranslated. The Abhidhamma lists 4 kinds of *āsava*: the influxes of (1) sense-desire (*kām’āsava*), (2) (desire for eternal) existence (*bhav’āsava*), (3) wrong views (*diṭṭh’āsava*), (4) ignorance (*avijjāsava*) (D 16.2.4, Pm 1.442, 561, Dhs §§1096-1100, Vbh §937). These 4 are also known as “floods” (*oghā*) and “yokes” (*yogā*). The list of 3 influxes (omitting the influx of views) [43] is probably older and is found more frequently in the Suttas (D 3:216, 33.1.10-(20); M 1:55, 3:41; A 3.59, 67, 6.63). The destruction of these influxes is equivalent to arhathood. See BDict: *āsava*.

¹⁸ M 43.13/1:294 = SD 35.1.

¹⁹ See SD 10.1(8); (**Āhāra**) **Kāya S** (S 46.2/5:64-67); (**Bojhaṅga**) **Sīla S** (S 46.3/5:67-70) = SD 10.15; (**Ajjhat-ta**) **Āṅga S** (S 46.49/5:101), (**Bahiddhā**) **Āṅga S** (S 46.50/5:102), **Āhāra S** (S 46.51/5:102-107) = SD 7.15.

²⁰ See **Sāriputta S 2** (S 55.5/5:347 f) = SD 16.5. Here wise attention is one of **the limbs for streamwinning** (*sotāpatti-y-aṅgāni*, alt tr “limbs of streamwinning”): (1) association with true persons (ie true practitioners, esp saints); (2) hearing the True Teaching; (3) wise attention; (4) practice of the Dharma in accordance with the Dharma (D 33.1.11(13)/3:227; Pm 2:189 f). These are preliminary practices that lead to the attainment of streamwinning. In **Paññā, vuḍḍhi S** (A 5.246) these same 4 qualities are called *vuḍḍhi, dhamma*, “virtues conducive to growth” (A 5.246/2:245); cf the 5 factors of noble growth (*ariya, vuḍḍhi*): (**Tadah’**) **Uposatha S** (A 3.70.8b/1:210) = SD 4.18; **Sambadh’okāsa S** (A 6.26.8/3:316) = SD 15.7a; **Pañca Vaḍḍhi S 1** (A 5.63/3:80); **Pañca Vaḍḍhi S 2** (A 5.64/-3:80). See S:B 762 n120. Cf (2) *sotāpannassa aṅgāni*. In **Pañca Vera Bhaya S** (S 12.41/2:68-70) = SD 3.3(4.2).

²¹ It 1.2.6/9 f; called **Yoniso Manasikāra S** by Comy (ItA 1:150).

²² S 45.49.2-3/5:29 f = SD 34.11.

The Discourse on the Accomplishment of Wise Attention

S 45.55/5:31

The dawn parable

2 Dawn, bhikshus, is the forerunner, the harbinger, of sunrise.²³

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

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

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

The *viveka, nissita* formula

4 Here, bhikshus,²⁴

a monk cultivates *right view*

based on solitude, on dispassion,²⁵ on cessation,²⁶ maturing in release.²⁷

He cultivates *right intention*

based on solitude, on dispassion, on cessation, maturing in release.

He cultivates *right speech*

based on solitude, on dispassion, on cessation, maturing in release.

He cultivates *right action*

based on solitude, on dispassion, on cessation, maturing in release.

He cultivates *right livelihood*

based on solitude, on dispassion, on cessation, maturing in release.

He cultivates *right effort*

based on solitude, on dispassion, on cessation, maturing in release.

He cultivates *right mindfulness*

based on solitude, on dispassion, on cessation, maturing in release.

He cultivates *right concentration*

based on solitude, on dispassion, on cessation, maturing in release.

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

— evaṃ —

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²³ *Sūriyassa bhikkhave udayato etaṃ pubbaṅgamaṃ etaṃ pubba, nimittaṃ, yad idaṃ aruṇ’uggaṃ*, lit “This, bhikshus, is the forerunner, this is the harbinger to the rising of the sun, namely, the sun.”

²⁴ *Idha bhikkhave bhikkhu sammā, diṭṭhiṃ bhāveti viveka, nissitaṃ virāga, nissitaṃ nirodha, nissitaṃ vossagga, - pariṇāmiṃ*. This whole phrase, beginning with “based on solitude”—*viveka, nissitaṃ virāga, nissitaṃ nirodha, nissitaṃ vossagga, nissitaṃ vossagga, pariṇāmiṃ dhamma, vicaya, sambojjhaṅgaṃ*—is called **the *viveka, nissita* formula**. See R Gethin, *The Buddhist Path to Awakening*, 2003:162-168. On the *viveka, nissita* formula, see ***Viveka, nissita*** = SD 20.4; see also “Introduction to the Satipatthāna Suttas” = SD 13.1 §4.2c n.

²⁵ *Virāga* also “fading away (of lust).”

²⁶ *Nirodha*, that is, “cessation of suffering.”

²⁷ *Vossagga*, also “letting go, relinquishment.” MA says that there are 2 kinds of letting go or relinquishment (of suffering) (*vossagga*): “giving up” (*pariccāga*), ie the abandonment of defilements, and “entering into” (*pakkhandana*), ie culminating in nirvana. **Gethin** notes that this phrase is not unique to the 7 *bojjhaṅgā*, but is also found in connection with the factors of the noble eightfold path, the *indriyā* and *balā* (2001:162 f). This formula shows that that each *bojjhaṅga* is to be developed successively “as dependent on solitude, dispassion [fading away] and cessation” (Gethin 2001:166).