

6

Vitakka Saṅṭhāna Sutta

The Discourse on the Stilling of Thoughts | M 20

Theme: How to overcome distractions during meditation

Translated by Piya Tan ©2003 2013 2014

1 Related suttas

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

1.2 *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha* reminds us that “[t]he five signs (*nimitta*) mentioned in this Sutta may be understood as practical methods of removing the distracting thoughts, but should be resorted to only when the distractions become persistent and obtrusive; at other times the meditator should remain with his primary subject of meditation.” (M:ÑB 1206 n239)

1.3 These methods, however, are effective means for mental focus in daily tasks like studying and working, and in psychotherapy, such as the treatment for phobias. In modern psychological terms, these 5 methods may be respectively called thought displacement [§3], aversion therapy [§4], non-attention or avoidance [§5], thought reduction or mental analysis [§6], and sustained effort [§7].

2 The 5th 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 armpit.

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 fifth method is out of place here, in the Vitakka Saṅṭhāna Sutta, as the Buddha discourages the practice of self-mortification. Scholars, such as W L King and J Bronkhorst, think that the inclusion of this method is due to Jain influence, that “Jain practices had come to be accepted by at least some Buddhists.”³ This is, of course, conjectural at best.

¹ Wheel 21, Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1960.

² MĀ 101 = T1.588a-589a.

³ W L King 1980:10. Quote by J Bronkhorst 1999:86.

Although this method does not work in bringing awakening to the Bodhisattva, it is not actually a method based on self-mortification, but merely a gesture of unrelenting determination [2.2.4.1]. In fact, the Vitakka Saṅghāna Sutta does not present this fifth 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].⁴

2.2 THE LAST RESORT

2.2.1 The 5th method should not be understood as “will-power” as this goes against the teachings of **the (Dasaka) Cetanā’karaṇīya Sutta** (A 10.2)⁵ and **the (Ekādasaka) Cetanā’karaṇīya Sutta** (A 11.2),⁶ 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.⁷

In other words, we can neither wish nor pray for progress in meditation, as instructed in **the (Pañca-ka) Itṭha 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.⁸

2.2.2 Bronkhorst, in his *The Two Traditions of Meditation in Ancient India*, thinks that the 5th 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 Saṅghāna Sutta, “monks are advised to do what is incorrect elsewhere [M 1:242]” (1993: 54)!⁹

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.¹⁰

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 2.1.5) 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

⁴ 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).

⁵ A 10.2,1/5:2-4 (SD 41.6).

⁶ A 11.2,1-10 (SD 33.3b).

⁷ See SD 47.2 (2.2.1).

⁸ A 5.43/3:47-49 (SD 47.2).

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

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

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!”¹¹

2.2.4.2 The Vitakka Saṅṭhāna 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).¹²

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

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

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

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

3 Saṅṭhāna

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 vi *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 thought technically correct, is not as contextually appropriate as “stilling” [§6]. And the context here is meditation.

¹¹ A 2.5/1:50 (SD 51.5).

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

¹³ MA 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).

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

¹⁵ See **Saṁsappati Pariyāya S** (A 10.205/5:288, 291); see also M 1:390, 3:203; A 372-74, 186, 5:88; Kvu 522.

4 Result of the practice

4.1 The Vitakka Saṅṭhāna Sutta concludes with these words:

*Ayaṃ vuccati bhikkhave bhikkhu **vasī vitakka,pariyāya,pathesu**. Yaṃ vitakkaṃ ākaṅkhissati taṃ vitakkaṃ vitakkessati. Yaṃ vitakkaṃ n'ākaṅkhissati, na taṃ vitakkaṃ vitakkessati. Acchechi taṇhaṃ, vāvattayi¹⁶ saṃyojanaṃ sammā mānābhisamayā antam akāsi dukkhassa.¹⁷*

That monk, bhikshus, 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 down craving, discarded the fetter, penetrated conceit and made an end of suffering. [§8]

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.¹⁸

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 Vitakka-saṅṭhāna 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,²⁰ confirming that whereas in the case of the Vitakkasaṅṭhāna 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)

¹⁶ Elsewhere (in other eds & suttas), vll *vivattayi*.

¹⁷ 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.

¹⁸ 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.

¹⁹ *Āsavā...pahīnā honti...acchechi taṇhaṃ vāvattayi saṃyojanaṃ sammā mānābhisamayā antam akāsi dukkhassa* (M 2.22/1:12).

²⁰ MĀ 10 = T1.432c26 & T31 = T1.814b2.

4.3 An alternative explanation of this Sutta conclusion is possible. Let us look closer at this crucial sentence again:

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 would have been simpler:

**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.

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

Acchechi taṇhaṃ, vāvattayi saṃyojanaṃ sammā mānābhisamayā antam akāsi dukkhassa.

He has cut down craving, discarded the fetters, penetrated conceit and made an end of suffering. [§8]

However, as this stock passage is missing from the Madhyama Āgama version, it is likely that it was added later on.

— — —

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 Sāvattihī. 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 “Bhikkhus, when a monk is devoted to the higher mind [meditation],²¹ he should from time to time²² turn his attention to 5 signs [mental objects].²³ What are the five?

(1) Thought displacement

3 ²⁴Here, bhikkhus, while a monk²⁵ is attending to some sign [mental object],²⁶ and there arises in him bad unwholesome thoughts connected with desire,²⁷ hate²⁸ or delusion,²⁹ then he should turn his attention to **a different sign connected with the wholesome.**³⁰

By attending to a different sign connected with the wholesome, those bad unwholesome thoughts connected with desire, hate or delusion are eliminated and disappear.

By their elimination, the mind thus stands firm internally, settles down, becomes unified and concentrated.

3.2 PARABLE OF THE PEGS. Just as a skilled carpenter or a carpenter’s apprentice, striking hard (at a large peg), pushing it out, removing the large peg with a smaller one,³¹

²¹ Higher mind (*adhicitta*), according to MA 2:87, so called because it is higher than the ordinary wholesome mind of the ten 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.”

²² “From time to time.” Comy: That is, these five methods should be applied only when any imperfection (*upakkilesa*) arises during his meditation, not otherwise. (MA 2:87)

²³ “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 six sense-objects or objects presented at the six 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 *Satipatthāna Suttas*, SD 13.1 (3.1.4) & *Nimitta*, SD 19.7.

²⁴ *Idha bhikkhave bhikkhuno yaṃ nimittam āgamma yaṃ nimittam manasikaroto uppajjanti pāpakā akusalā vitakkā chandūpasamhitā’pi dosūpasamhitā’pi mohūpasamhitā’pi.*

²⁵ 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).

²⁶ *Nimitta*, see above §2 n.

²⁷ 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.

²⁸ 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). Or, one could reflect on the parable of the saw (*Kakacūpama S*, M 21, 20/1:129). 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 Rāhul’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).

²⁹ 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).

³⁰ *Tena, bhikkhave, bhikkhunā tamhā nimittā aññam nimittam manasi kātabbam kusalūpasamhitam.*

³¹ *Seyyathā’pi bhikkhave dakkho palagaṇḍo vā palagaṇḍ’antevāsī vā sukhumāya aññiyā oḷārikam aññim abhinhaneyya abhinīhareyya abhinivatteyya* [Ee Ce *abhinivajjeyya*].

even so, bhikshus, while a monk is attending to some sign [object], and there arises in him bad unwholesome thoughts connected with desire, hate or delusion,

then, bhikshus, that monk should turn his attention to a different sign *connected with the wholesome*.

By attending to a different sign connected with the wholesome, those bad unwholesome thoughts connected with desire, hate or delusion are eliminated and disappear.

By their elimination, the mind thus stands firm internally, settles down, becomes unified and concentrated.

(2) Aversion therapy

4 If, bhikshus, while the monk is paying attention to a different sign connected with the wholesome, and there still arises in him bad unwholesome thoughts connected with desire, with hate, or with delusion,

then, bhikshus, that monk **should examine the disadvantage [the danger] of those thoughts**, thus:³² ‘These thoughts are unwholesome, they are blameworthy, they bring suffering.’³³

Then the bad unwholesome thoughts are eliminated and disappear.

By their elimination, the mind thus stands firm internally, settles down, becomes unified and concentrated.

4.2 PARABLE OF THE WELL-DRESSED. Bhikshus, just as a man or a woman, a youth or a maiden,³⁴ well-dressed and fond of ornaments, would feel troubled, ashamed, disgusted³⁵ by a carcass of a snake, a dog, or a human **[120]** hung around his or her neck,³⁶

even so, bhikshus, should the monk get rid of the bad unwholesome thoughts by examining the disadvantage of those thoughts, thus: ‘These thoughts are unwholesome, they are blameworthy, they bring suffering.’³⁷

While he is examining the danger of these thoughts, those bad unwholesome thoughts are eliminated and disappear.

³² This and foll lines: *tena bhikkhave bhikkhunā tesam vitakkānaṃ ādīnava upaparikkhitabbo – ‘iti’p’ime vitakkā akusalā, iti’p’ime vitakkā sāvajjā, iti’p’ime vitakkā dukkha, vipākāti.*

³³ 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).

³⁴ *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), **Ākaṅkheyya S** (M 5/1:32), **Vitakka Saṅghāna S** (M 20/1:119); **Jātaka Nidāna, kathā** (J 1:5).

³⁵ *Aṭṭiyāti harāyati jigucchati*: see **Nibbidā**, SD 20.1 (2.3).

³⁶ *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.

³⁷ *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.

By their elimination, the mind thus stands firm internally, settles down, becomes unified and concentrated.

(3) Non-attention³⁸

5 If, bhikkhus, while the monk is examining the dangers of those thoughts, thus: ‘These thoughts are unwholesome, they are blameworthy, they bring suffering,’ there still arises in him bad unwholesome thoughts connected with desire, with hate, or with delusion, then **he should not mind them, he should disregard them.**³⁹

While he is not minding, disregarding them, those bad unwholesome thoughts are eliminated and disappear.

By their elimination, the mind thus stands firm internally, settles down, becomes unified and concentrated.

5.2 PARABLE OF THE LOOKER. Bhikkhus, just as a man with eyes, not wishing to see sights around him, would shut his eyes or look away in another direction,⁴⁰

even so, bhikkhus, should the monk get rid of the bad unwholesome thoughts by not minding them and by disregarding them.

Having not minded them, disregarded them, those bad unwholesome thoughts are eliminated and disappear.

By their elimination, the mind thus stands firm internally, settles down, becomes unified and concentrated.

(4) Thought reduction⁴¹

6 If, bhikkhus, while the monk is not minding and is disregarding those thoughts, there still arises in him bad unwholesome thoughts connected with desire, with hate, or with delusion,

then, bhikkhus, that monk **should attend to the stilling of the thought-formation**⁴² of those bad unwholesome thoughts.⁴³

³⁸ Or, avoidance.

³⁹ *Tena bhikkhave bhikkhunā tesaṃ vitakkānaṃ 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).

⁴⁰ *Seyyathā’pi bhikkhave cakkhumā puriso āpātha, gatānaṃ rūpānaṃ adassana, kāmo assa; so nimīleyya vā aññena vā apalokeyya.*

⁴¹ Or, mental analysis.

⁴² *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.

⁴³ *Tena bhikkhave bhikkhunā tesaṃ vitakkānaṃ vitakka, saṅkhāra, saṅṭhānaṃ manasikātabbāraṃ.* **Daddabha J** (J 322) illustrates this method of going to the root or source of the problem.

Having attended to the stilling of the thought-formations, those bad unwholesome thoughts are eliminated and disappear.

By their elimination, the mind thus stands firm internally, settles down, becomes unified and concentrated.

6.2 PARABLE OF THE WALKER. Bhikshus, just as a man,
 finding no reason for walking fast, walks slowly;
 finding no reason for walking slowly, stands;
 finding no reason for standing, sits down;
 finding no reason for sitting down, lies down

—thus giving up an awkward posture for an easy one—⁴⁴

even so, bhikshus, should the monk, attend to the stilling of the thought-formation [by identifying the causes] of those bad unwholesome thoughts.

Having stilled the thought-formations [identified the causes] of those bad unwholesome thoughts, they are eliminated and disappear.⁴⁵

By their elimination, the mind thus stands firm internally, settles down, becomes unified and concentrated.⁴⁶

(5) The last resort: Sustained effort⁴⁷

7 If, bhikshus, while the monk is attending to the stilling of the thought-formation, there still arises in him bad unwholesome thoughts connected with desire, with hate, or with delusion, then **with clenched teeth and the tongue pressing on the palate**,⁴⁸ he should subdue, restrain, attack the (bad) mind with the (good) mind.⁴⁹ [121]

With clenched teeth and the tongue pressing on the palate, those bad unwholesome thoughts are eliminated and disappear.

By their elimination, the mind thus stands firm internally, settles down, becomes unified and concentrated.

7.2 PARABLE OF THE WRESTLERS. Bhikshus, just as a strong man holding a weaker man by the head or by the shoulders, would restrain, subdue, attack him,⁵⁰

⁴⁴ All the prec lines here: *Seyyathā'pi bhikkhave puriso sīghaṃ gaccheyya. Tassa evam assa – kiṃ nu kho ahaṃ sīghaṃ gacchāmi? Yaṃ, nūnāhaṃ saṅikaṃ gaccheyyaṃ'ti. So saṅikaṃ gaccheyya. Tassa evam assa – kiṃ nu kho ahaṃ saṅikaṃ gacchāmi? Yaṃ, nūnāhaṃ tiṭṭheyyaṃ'ti. So tiṭṭheyya. Tassa evam assa – kiṃ nu kho ahaṃ ṭhito? Yaṃ nūnāhaṃ nisīdeyyaṃ'ti. So nisīdeyya. Tassa evam assa – kiṃ nu kho ahaṃ nisīno? Yaṃ, nūnāhaṃ nipajjeyyaṃ'ti. So nipajjeyya. Evañ hi so bhikkhave puriso oḷārikaṃ oḷārikaṃ iriyā, pathaṃ abhinivajjetvā [Se abhinissajjetvā] sukhumaṃ sukhumaṃ iriyā, pathaṃ kappeyya.*

⁴⁵ Be, WT: *Evam eva kho, bhikkhave, tassa ce bhikkhuno tesam pi vitakkānaṃ asati, amanasikāraṃ āpajjato uppajjant'eva pāpakā akusalā vitakkā chandūpasamhitāpi dosūpasamhitāpi mohūpasamhitāpi te pahīyanti te abbhatthaṃ gacchanti.* The underscored is clearly wrong. I have tr according to the contextual flow of the text.

⁴⁶ On “thought reduction,” see further **Samāṇa Gadrabha S** (A 3.81), SD 24/10b (2.1.3).

⁴⁷ See (1.4).

⁴⁸ *Dante'bhīdantam-ādhāya jivhāya tāluṃ 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 one not to be content with wholesome mental states and to be unremitting in one's “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).

⁴⁹ *Tena bhikkhave bhikkhunā dantēbhīdantam-ādhāya jivhāya tāluṃ āhacca cetasā cittaṃ abhiniggaṇhitabbarā abhinippīḷetabbarā abhisantāpetabbarā.*

even so, bhikshus, if that monk is attending to the stilling of the thought-formation, there still arises in him bad unwholesome thoughts connected with desire, with hate, or with delusion,

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

Then the bad unwholesome thoughts are eliminated and disappear.

By their elimination, the mind thus stands firm internally, settles down, becomes unified and concentrated.

Master-minding

8 Bhikshus,

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

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

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

By their elimination, the mind thus stands firm internally, settles down, becomes unified and concentrated.

(2) When the monk is examining **the dangers of those thoughts**, those bad unwholesome thoughts, connected with desire, with hate, or with delusion, are eliminated and disappear.

By their elimination, the mind thus 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, with hate, or with delusion, are eliminated and disappear.

By their elimination, the mind thus stands firm internally, settles down, becomes unified and concentrated.

(4) When the monk **stills the thought-formation**, those bad unwholesome thoughts, connected with desire, with hate, or with delusion, are eliminated and disappear.

By their elimination, the mind thus stands firm internally, settles down, becomes unified and concentrated.

(5) When the monk, **with clenched teeth and the tongue pressing on the palate**, subdues, restrains, attacks the (bad) mind with the (good) mind, any such bad unwholesome thoughts, connected with desire, with hate, or with delusion, are eliminated and disappear.

By their elimination, the mind thus stands firm internally, settles down, [122] becomes unified and concentrated.

8.2 That monk, bhikshus, is called **a master of the thought-paths**.⁵¹

⁵²He 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 down craving, discarded the fetters,⁵³ penetrated conceit⁵⁴ and made an end of suffering."⁵⁵

⁵⁰ *Seyyathā'pi bhikkhave balavā puriso dubbala, taram purisam sise vā gale vā khandhe vā gahetvā abhiniggaṇheyya abhinippīleyya abhisantāpeyya.*

⁵¹ *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.

⁵² These last two sentences: *Yaṃ vitakkaṃ ākaṅkhissati taṃ vitakkaṃ vitakkessati. Yaṃ vitakkaṃ n'ākaṅkhissati na taṃ vitakkaṃ vitakkessati. Acchechi taṇhaṃ, vāvattayi saṃyojanaṃ sammā mānābhisamayā antaṃ akāsi dukkhassa.* See Intro (4) above.

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

— evaṃ —

Bibliography

Bronkhorst, Johannes

1993 *The Two Traditions of Meditation in Ancient India*. [Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1986.] 2nd ed, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1993. [In part, a poorly argued critique of Buddhist meditation, even from an academic angle, and also suggesting lack of meditation experience.]

<http://ahandfulofleaves.files.wordpress.com/2012/08/two-traditions-of-meditation-in-ancient-india-bronkhorst-1993.pdf>

1998 "Self and meditation in Indian Buddhism," International Conference on Korean Son Buddhism, Kobulch'ongnim Paekyang-sa Buddhist Monastery, 19-22 Aug 1998. Seoul: Kobulch'ongnim Mu-ch'asonhoi Organizing Committee, 1998: 141-159. (Korean translation pp 161-178.)

<http://kr.buddhism.org/zen/koan/y-bronkhorst.htm>.

1999 "The Buddha and the Jains reconsidered," in *Approaches to Jaina Studies: Philosophy, Logic, Rituals and Symbols*, (ed N K Wagle et al), Toronto: Univ of Toronto, Centre for South Asian Studies, 1999:86-90.

de Silva, Padmal

1990 "Buddhist psychology: a review of theory and practice." *Current Psychology* 9,3 Fall 1990:236-254. Digital download from <http://ccbs.ntu.edu.tw/FULLTEXT/JR-ADM/silva.htm>. (Esp pp10 f).

2001 "A psychological analysis of the *Vitakkasaṅṭhāna Sutta*." UK Association for Buddhist Studies: *Buddhist Studies Review* 18 2001:65-72. <http://www.ukabs.org.uk/ukabs/wp-content/uploads/2010/09/BSR-18.1-2001.pdf>.

Gombrich, Richard F

1994 "The Buddha and the Jains: A reply to Professor Bronkhorst." *Asiatische Studien* 48 1994:1069-1096. <http://www.ocbs.org/images/documents/richardswork/richard43.pdf>.

King, Winston L

1980 *Theravāda Meditation: The Buddhist transformation of yoga*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1980.

Nyanaponika

1978a *The Roots of Good and Evil*. Wheel 251-253. Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1978: 60-68 (ch 23). <http://www.bps.lk/olib/wh/wh251.pdf>.

Thich Minh Chau

1991 *The Chinese Madhyama Āgama and the Pāli Majjhima Nikāya*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1991.

131111 141015r 150507r 161122 170812 180630

⁵³ The 10 fetters (MA 1:87). The 10 fetters (*dasa saṃyojana*) (in connection with sainthood) 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*), envy (*issā*), avarice (*macchariya*) and ignorance (*avijjā*) (Vbh 17). See M:NB 2001:42 f.

⁵⁴ By means of vision and by getting rid of them, both through penetration (*abhisamaya*) (MA 1:87,4).

⁵⁵ This stock phrase usually refers to the attainment of arhathood. See Intro (3) above.