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**The Removal of  
Distracting Thoughts  
Vitakka-sañḥāna Sutta**

*Soma Thera*



# **The Removal of Distracting Thoughts Vitakka-sañṭhāna Sutta**



**A Discourse of the Buddha  
(Majjhima Nikāya No. 20)  
With the Commentary and  
Marginal Notes**

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# The Removal of Distracting Thoughts



Thus have I heard. At one time the Blessed One was staying at Sāvattthī, in Jeta’s Grove, Anāthapiṇḍika’s Pleasance. The Blessed One addressed the bhikkhus, saying, “Bhikkhus,” and they replied to him saying, “Reverend Sir.” The Blessed One spoke as follows:

“Five things should be reflected on from time to time, by the bhikkhu who is intent on the higher consciousness. What five?

When evil unskilful thoughts connected with desire, hate and delusion arise in a bhikkhu through reflection on an adventitious object, he should, (in order to get rid of that), reflect on a different object which is connected with skill. Then the evil unskilful thoughts are eliminated; they disappear. By their elimination, the mind stands firm, settles down, becomes unified and concentrated, just within (his subject of meditation).

Like an experienced carpenter or carpenter’s apprentice, striking hard at, pushing out, and getting rid of a coarse peg with a fine one. should the bhikkhu in order to get rid of the adventitious object, reflect on a different object which is connected with skill. Then the evil unskilful thoughts

connected with desire, hate and delusion are eliminated; they disappear. By their elimination the mind stands firm, settles down, becomes unified and concentrated, just within (his subject of meditation)

If the evil unskilful thoughts continue to arise in a bhikkhu, who in order to get rid of an adventitious object reflects on a different object which is connected with skill, he should ponder on the disadvantages of unskilful thoughts thus: Truly these thoughts of mine are unskilful blameworthy and productive of misery. Then the evil unskilful thoughts are eliminated; they disappear. By their elimination, the mind stands firm, settles down, becomes unified and concentrated, just within (his subject of meditation).

Like a well-dressed young man or woman who feels horrified, humiliated and disgusted because of the carcass of a snake, dog or human that is hung round his or her neck, should the bhikkhu in whom unskilful thoughts continue to arise in spite of his reflection on the object which is connected with skill, ponder on the disadvantages of unskilful thoughts thus: Truly, these thoughts of mine are unskilful, blameworthy and productive of misery. Then the evil, unskilful thoughts are eliminated; they disappear. By their elimination, the mind stands firm, settles down, becomes unified and concentrated, just within (his subject of meditation).

If evil, unskilful thoughts continue to arise in a bhikkhu who ponders on their disadvantageousness, he should in

regard to them, endeavour to be without attention and reflection. Then the evil, unskilful thoughts are eliminated; they disappear. By their elimination, the mind stands firm, settles down, becomes unified and concentrated, just within (his subject of meditation).

Like a keen-eyed man shutting his eyes and looking away from some direction in order to avoid seeing visible objects come within sight, should the bhikkhu in whom evil, unskilful thoughts continue to arise in spite of his pondering on their disadvantageousness, endeavour to be without attention and reflection as regards them. Then the evil, unskilful thoughts are eliminated; they disappear. By their elimination, the mind stands firm, settles down, becomes unified and concentrated, just within (his subject of meditation).

If evil, unskilful thoughts continue to arise in a bhikkhu in spite of his endeavour to be without attention and reflection as regards evil, unskilful thoughts, he should reflect on the removal of the (thought) source of those unskilful thoughts. Then the evil, unskilful thoughts are eliminated; they disappear. By their elimination, the mind stands firm, settles down, becomes unified and concentrated, just within (his subject of meditation).

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, and finding no reason for sitting down, lies down, and thus getting rid of a

posture rather coarse resorts to a easier posture, just so should the bhikkhu in whom evil, unskilful thoughts arise, in spite of his endeavour to be without attention and reflection regarding them, reflect on the removal of the (thought) source of those unskilful thoughts. Then the evil, unskilful thoughts are eliminated; they disappear. By their elimination, the mind stands firm, settles down, becomes unified and concentrated, just within (his subject of meditation).

If evil, unskilful thoughts continue to arise in a bhikkhu in spite of his reflection on the removal of the source of unskilful thoughts, he should with clenched teeth and the tongue pressing on the palate, restrain, subdue and beat down the (evil) mind by the (good) mind. Then the evil, unskilful thoughts connected with desire, hate and delusion are eliminated; they disappear. By their elimination, the mind stands firm, settles down, becomes unified and concentrated, just within (his subject of meditation).

Like a strong man holding a weaker man by the head or shoulders and restraining, subduing and beating him down, should the bhikkhu in whom evil, unskilful thoughts continue to arise in spite of his reflection on the source of unskilful thoughts, restrain, subdue and beat down the (evil) mind by the (good) mind, with clenched teeth and the tongue pressing on the palate. Then the evil, unskilful thoughts connected with desire, hate and delusion are eliminated; they disappear. By their elimination, the mind stands firm, settles down, becomes unified and

concentrated, just within (his subject of meditation).

When, indeed, bhikkhus, evil unskilful thoughts due to reflection on an adventitious object are eliminated, when they disappear, and the mind stands firm, settles down, becomes unified and concentrated just within (his subject of meditation), through his reflection on an object connected with skill, through his pondering on the disadvantages of unskilful thoughts, his endeavouring to be without attentiveness and reflection as regards those thoughts, his reflection on the removal of the source of those thoughts or through his restraining, subduing and beating down of the evil mind by the good mind with clenched teeth and tongue pressing on the palate, that bhikkhu is called a master of the paths taken by the courses of thought. The thought he wants to think, that, he thinks; the thought he does not want to think, that, he does not think. He has cut off craving, removed the fetter, rightly mastered pride, and made an end of suffering. “

The Blessed One said this, and the bhikkhus glad at heart, approved of his words.



# The Commentary to the Discourse on the Removal of Distracting Thoughts

## With Marginal Notes from the Subcommentary

1 **Thus have I heard:** <sup>[1]</sup> *evaṃ me sutam*. This Discourse on the Removal of Distracting Thoughts (Vitakkasaṅṭhāna Sutta) was heard by me in this way.

“I” refers to the Elder ānanda who recited the Discourse-collection (Sutta Piṭaka) of the Pali Canon at the first Council of purified ones (*arahants*) held at Rājagaha after the passing away of the Buddha.

**By the bhikkhu who is intent on the higher consciousness:** *adhicittam anuyuttena bhikkhunā*. Consciousness connected with the practice of the ten courses of skilful action (*dasa kusala-kamma-pathā*) is referred to here as just (wholesome) consciousness (*cittameva*). Superior to that (merely wholesome consciousness) is the consciousness of the eight absorptions become a basis for the development of insight

(*vipassanā pādakaṃ aṭṭha-samāpatti-cittaṃ*). This (superior) consciousness is the higher consciousness.

Consciousness connected with the practice of the ten courses of skilful action is just an example of what is not meant here by the term higher consciousness. Consciousness of the ten courses of skilful action is just consciousness not forming a part of things supernatural (*uttarimanussadhamma*). [2]

Consciousness of the eight absorptions that has become a basis for the development of insight, is meant here by “higher consciousness:

Some (i.e., dwellers of the Abhayagiri Vihāra at Anurādhapura) say that the consciousness associated with insight is the higher consciousness (*vipassanāya sampayuttaṃ adhicittaṃ’ti keci*).

**By one who is intent on** (*anuyuttēna*) means: by one who is diligently occupied with (*yutta payuttēna*).

This bhikkhu is not intent on the higher consciousness the while he is going forth, sitting-mat in hand, to a place near a tree in a jungle—thicket, at the bottom of a hill, or on a slope, with the thought, “I shall do the recluse’s duty.” He is also not intent on that, when removing grass and leaves for the sitting place, with hands or feet. When, however, having sat down, after washing his hands and feet, he remains with legs crossed, having taken up his preliminary subject of meditation, he is indeed intent on the higher consciousness.

“Intent on” means: intent on producing the yet unarisen higher things and zealously developing to completion the higher things that have already arisen.

“The preliminary subject of meditation” (*mūla-kammaṭṭhāna*) is the subject of meditation the bhikkhu is fostering (*pārihāriya-kammaṭṭhāna*).

“When ... he remains ... having taken up” means: when having taken up the preliminary subject of meditation, he remains applying himself to it (or when having taken up the preliminary subject he applies himself to the development of it).

Though full absorption is not reached through the meditation he is still one intent on the higher consciousness.

**Things:** *nimittāni* are practical methods—reasonable ways (*kāraṇāni*).

**From time to time:** *kālena kālaṃ* means: on different occasions (*samaye samaye*).

Is not the subject of meditation to be reflected on always. without putting it aside even for a moment? Why did the Blessed One say “from time to time”?

There are thirty eight subjects classified in the text (*pāḷiyaṃ*). By the bhikkhu who having selected one of these, one which appeals to him, and is seated there is no reflection on these

five things (*nimittāni*) so long as imperfections (*upakkilesa*) do not appear.

When an imperfection appears, the danger should be driven away by means of these things.

Pointing out this the Blessed One said: “From time to time...”

The opinion of the objector is as follows: Because it is said “by him who is intent on the higher consciousness (*adhicittaṃ anuyutta*)” and as the term “intent on the higher consciousness” means: diligently applying oneself to the meditation without a break” is it not the fact that the Blessed One began this exposition with the words, “these five things should be reflected on from time to time”, in order to point out the method of driving out danger to the meditation that progresses?

The other stated that there are thirty eight subjects of meditation in the text, and so forth, in order to point out that the Master said, “From time to time” because these five things have to be reflected on at the proper time for the purpose of purifying the mind of the beginner devoted to inner culture when sometimes imperfections of meditation (*bhāvanā upakkilesa*) arise in him.

**Connected with desire** (*chandūpaṣaṃhita*): means associated with desire, associated with lust (*rāgasampayutta*). The field

(*khetta*) and the object (*ārammaṇa*) of these three obsessive thoughts should be known.

The eight kinds of consciousness associated with greed are the field of obsessive thoughts connected with desire.

The two kinds of consciousness associated with hatred are the field of obsessive thoughts connected with hate.

Even the twelve kinds of unwholesome consciousness are the field of obsessive thoughts connected with delusion. The two kinds of consciousness combining with scepticism and restlessness, indeed are equally the field of these obsessive thoughts connected with delusion. To even all three kinds of obsessive thought, just living beings and inanimate things are the object, since these obsessive thoughts come into being in regard to living beings and inanimate things viewed unimpartially by way of liking and disliking them.

Living beings and inanimate things are unimpartially viewed by way of liking and disliking when the dear and the not dear are unequally seen, are wrongly seen.

Viewing unimpartially (*asamapekkhaṇam*) is the laying hold of an object with unsystematic attention through looking on ignorantly in a worldly way (*gehasita-aññānupekkha-vasena ārammaṇassa ayoniso gahaṇam*).

**He should... reflect on a different object which is connected with skill: *aññam nimittaṃ manasikātabbaṃ***

*kusalūpasamhitam* means: an object different from the adventitious object, and one which is connected with skill, should be reflected on.

Here the explanation of the term “different object” is as follows: When a thought connected with desire for living beings, arises, the development of the idea of the unlovely (*asubha-bhāvanā*) is a different object, and when a thought connected on with desire for inanimate things arises, the reflection on impermanence (*anicca-manasikāra*) is a different object.

When a thought connected with hate towards living beings ‘arises, the development of the idea of friendliness (*metta-bhāvanā*) is a different object, and when a thought connected with hate. for inanimate things arises, the reflection on the modes of materiality (*dhātumanasikāra*) is, a different object..

Wheresoever, a thought connected with delusion ‘concerning living beings or things arises, the fivefold reliance associated with the doctrine (*pañca dhammūpanissayo*) is the different object.

An object different from the adventitious object: *tato nimittato aññam nimittam*. A different, new object separate from the cause for the arising of unskillful thought connected with desire, hate and delusion (*tatchandūpasamhitādi-akusala-vitakkuppatti-kāraṇato*).

One which is connected with skill: *kusala-nimitto tam*. The cause for the proceeding of states of consciousness that is with skill.

Should be reflected on: *manasikātabbaṃ*. Should be placed in the mind, should be thought upon as a meditation, or should go on in the mind—flux (*citte thapetabbaṃ*).

The unlovely (*asubhaṃ*) is indeed the unlovely object (*asubha-nimittaṃ*).

When greed arises in regard to living beings with thoughts like the following: “This one’s hands are beautiful,” “This one’s feet are beautiful,” one should think by way of the unlovely thus: To what are you attached? Are you attached to the hair of the head, the hair of the body, nails, teeth, skin ... or urine? [3]

This body (*attabhāva*) held up by three hundred bones, bound with nine hundred nerve strings, plastered over ‘ with nine hundred lumps of flesh, wrapped completely in a wet skin, covered with the colour of the cuticle (*chavirāgena*), drips filth from the nine open sores and the ninety-nine thousand pores of the hairs of the body. It is filled with a collection of bones, is bad-smelling, contemptible, repellent, and is the sum of the thirty-two parts. There is neither essence not excellence in it. To one who thinks thus of the unlovely (nature of the body), the greed connected with living beings is cast out. Therefore the different object is the thinking on the object (*nimitta*) which produces greed, by way of the meditation on the unlovely (nature of the body).

When there is greed for inanimate things like bowls and robes it is cast out through reflection of two kinds of bringing about detachment for inanimate things, namely those on ownerlessness and temporariness, taught in the section of the enlightenment factors (*bojjhaṅga*) in the commentary to the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta. Therefore the thinking on the object (which produces greed), by way of the reflection of impermanence is the different object.

Reflection ... on ownerlessness and temporariness; this bowl gradually ends up as broken pieces, having changed color, became old, developed cracks and holes or having smashed up; this robe, having faded, worn out will have to be thrown away with the end of a stick, after it is used as a rag to wipe the feet with. If these had an owner, he would prevent them from being destroyed. In this manner should the reflection on ownerlessness be done. And the reflection on temporariness should be done with the thought that these cannot last long, that these are of brief duration.

When there is hatred towards living beings, friendliness should be developed as taught in the Discourse on the Overcoming of Ill-will (*āghāta-vinaya-sutta*), the instruction with the Parable of the Saw <sup>[4]</sup> (*kakacūpamovāda*), and the like. In one developing friendliness, hatred vanishes. Therefore the development of friendliness for the object (which produces anger) is the different object.



The Discourse on the Overcoming of Ill-will in the Aṅguttara Nikāya [5] is as follows:

“Bhikkhus, these are the five ways of overcoming ill-will. Whenever ill-will is arisen in a bhikkhu it should altogether be overcome. What are the five?

“Should ill-will arise at any time, in a person, friendliness should be developed in him ... compassion should be developed in him ... equanimity should be developed in him ... the state of being without mindfulness and reflection (in regard to the object producing hate) should be developed in him ... consciousness of the fact of one’s own karma as one’s own property should be developed in him ... Thus should ill-will be overcome in that person. Indeed, these are five ways of overcoming ill-will. Wherever it is arisen in a bhikkhu, it should be overcome entirely.”

“And the like”: similes like that of the firebrand from funeral pyre [6] (unclean, untouchable).

“Friendliness should be developed having overcome hate in the manner taught in the above mentioned teachings.

Further, when one gets angry with the stump (of a tree), a thorn, grass or leaves one should ask oneself:

With whom are you angry? Is it with the earth—element or

the water-element? Or who is it that is angry? Is it the earth-element or the water-element? To one Who reflects on the elements (*dhātumanasikāra*) anger in regard to inanimate things vanishes. Therefore the reflection of the elements of the object (internal or external—the thinker or the thought which produces anger) is the different object.

When, however, delusion appears, in any circumstances, there should be dependence on reliance on or the resorting to five things (five expedient things). They are as follows:

The practice of living under the guidance of a teacher.

The work of learning the doctrine.

The work of inquiring into the meaning of doctrines learnt.

The act of listening to the doctrine at suitable times.

The work of inquiring into what are and what are not causes

Through dependence on these five things or through resorting to these five expedients the element of delusion (*moha-dhātu*) [7] is eliminated.

In this way also a bhikkhu's delusion is eliminated: When he, while learning too, becomes energetic through the thought: The teacher punishes him who does not learn at the proper time, him who does not recite well and him who does not recite at all.

In this way also, a bhikkhu's delusion is eliminated: When

he, while inquiring from esteemed and respected bhikkhus, after going into their presence: “Reverend Sir, how is this? What does this mean?” dispels doubts. In this way also, a bhikkhu’s delusion is eliminated: When to him the meaning of various passages becomes clear while listening carefully to the doctrine, after going to a place where the doctrine is expounded to the public.

In this way, also a bhikkhu’s delusion is eliminated: While he becomes expert in discerning the cause of a thing from what is not its cause saying thus: “This is the reason for this; this not the reason.”

Further, unskilful thoughts are surely eliminated in one practising by any one of the thirty-eight subjects of meditation; but the lust, hatred and delusion which are eliminated by their direct opposites, by what is contrary to them, namely these five objects (or practical methods) are thoroughly eliminated.

It is like this: a fire may surely be put out after its being struck with firebrands, earth and branches, but when it is extinguished with water which is directly opposed to it, it is extinguished well. In the same way the lust, hatred and delusion which is eliminated with these five objects (*pañca nimittāni*, mentioned at the beginning of the discourse) are eliminated well. Therefore, it should be understood, were these stated.

Becomes energetic (*yatta-paṭiyatto*). The bhikkhu who is possessed of the desire for things like the asking of

permission to go to the village becomes energetic (*yatto*) and active (*sajjito*).

The meaning of various passages becomes clear (*tesu tesu ṭhānesu attho pākaṭo hoti*) = to one listening to the doctrine the meaning of different passages explained becomes clear with the comprehension thus: “Here, virtue is expounded, here concentration; here wisdom.”

Expert in discerning the cause of a thing from what is not its cause (*ṭhānāṭhānā vinicchaye cheko*) by knowing for instance that the eye, visible object, light and so forth are the reasons for eye-consciousness and not for ear-consciousness.

**Connected with skill** (*kusalūpasamhitam*). Dependent on skill, become a condition of skill.

**Just within** (*ajjhattikam eva*). Just inside the pasture (*gocarajjhattikam eva*), that is, just within the resort, the subject-of-meditation of the bhikkhu devoted to the higher consciousness.

**Carpenter** (*palagaṇḍho*) = joiner (*vaḍḍhaki*).

**With a fine peg** (*sukhumāya āṇiyam*). A peg of heartwood, finer than some peg one wishes to take out (or draw out) of a board (*yaṃ āṇiṃ niharitukāmo hoti, tato sukhumatarāya sāradaṛu āṇiyā*).

**Coarse peg** (*olārikāṃ āṇiṃ*). An incongruous peg in a board

or plank of sandalwood or of a heartwood (of sandal)  
(*candanaphalake vā sārāphalake va ākotitaṃ visamāṇiṃ*).

In a board (or plank) of ... heartwood (*sārāphalake*) =  
in a plank of sandal heartwood (*candanamaye  
sārāphalake*).

An incongruous peg (*visamāṇiṃ*) = a peg standing  
incompatibly there, in a board or plank of  
sandalwood (*visamākārena tattha thitaṃ āṇiṃ*).

The mind of the bhikkhu intent on the higher consciousness  
is like the plank of sandal heartwood; the unskilful thoughts  
are like the incongruous peg: the skilful object of meditation  
on things such as the unlovely which is different from the  
object producing unskilfulness is like the fine peg. The  
removal of unskilful objects such as the meditation on the  
unlovely is like the removal of the coarse with the fine peg.

If the yogin who, like a person shocked by the carcass slung  
round his neck by an enemy who has brought it  
(*paccaṭṭhikena ānetvā kaṇṭhe baddhena*), thinks wisely, by  
himself, of these unskilful thoughts as blamable and  
productive of suffering, in many ways, the unskilful  
thoughts are eliminated in him.

In many ways (*imināpi imināpi kāraṇena*). These  
thoughts are blamable and productive of suffering in  
many ways, because of their being produced through  
unskilfulness (*akosallasambhūtatāya*); of their being  
opposed to skill (*kusalapaṭipakkhatāya*) of their

unhealthiness through being afflicted with the disease of sense-desire called worldliness (*gehasitarogena sarogatāya*); of their being subject to the censure of the wise (*viññugarahitabbatāya*); because of their loathsomeness (*jigucchatāya*); because of the unpleasantness of their results (*anittaphalatāya*) and because of their nature of bringing about no satisfaction (*nirassādasamvattaniyatāya*).

But he who is unable to think wisely by himself should see his teacher and tell the teacher about the troubles (in meditation) Or he should see his preceptor, a respected fellow-bhikkhu or the chief of the order for the same purpose. Or he should ring the bell (or strike the gong), assemble even the order of bhikkhus and inform the order of the troubles (in meditation). For, at a meeting of many persons, there surely will be one learned man who will explain to him who is troubled: “Thus should the disadvantages of these thoughts be understood,” or he will check these thoughts of the person troubled (in meditation) with the talk that is intended for the removal of desire for the body (*kāyavicchandaniya kathā*) and so forth.

**Should endeavour to be without attention and reflection** (*asati amanasikāro āpajjitabbo*). Those unskilful thoughts should just not be remembered, not be dwelt upon. One should be occupied with something else.

Just as a man who does not want to see a certain object, shuts his eyes, just so should the bhikkhu in whom an

unskilful thought arises, while he is meditating on the subject of meditation to which he resorts repeatedly (*mūla-kammaṭṭhāna*). occupy himself with something else. By doing that his unskilful thought is eliminated. When that unskilful thought is eliminated he should again sit down to meditate on the subject of meditation he is keeping to, the preliminary object of meditation to which he repeatedly resorts (*mūla-kammaṭṭhāna*).

If the unskilful thought is not eliminated he should recite aloud some composition of doctrinal explanation he knows by heart. If when being occupied with something else in this way, too, it is not eliminated, he should take out from his bag a manual, if he has one, in Which the virtues of the Buddha and the Doctrine are written and by reading it occupy himself with something else.

If by that, too, it is not eliminated, he should take out of the bag such things like the pair of fire-sticks and by turning his attention to them, saying, This is the upper fire-stick, this is the lower," and so forth occupy himself with something else.

If by that, too, it is not eliminated he should, having taken out the receptacle (*sipāṭika*), by contemplating the requisites thus: "This is the awl; this is the pair of scissors; this is the nail-cutter; this is the needle." occupy himself with something else,

If by that, too, it is not eliminated, he should occupy himself with something else by darning the worn-out parts of the

robe. So long as the unskilful thought is not eliminated, he should by doing various skilful actions occupy himself with something else. When it is eliminated he should again sit down to meditate on the subject he is keeping to, (the preliminary object to which he resorts repeatedly).

“Composition of doctrinal explanation” (*dhammakathā pabandha*) = a composition helpful to the subject-of meditation (*kammaṭṭhānassa upakāro dhammakathā pabandho*).

“Manual” (*muṭṭhipotthako*, lit: fist-book, a hand-book). A book carried about and which is about the size of “the fist (hand).

“By contemplating” (*samannāmentena*) = by concentrating (*samannāharantena*).

But building work (erecting new buildings and repairing of old ones etc). should not be begun. Why? Because when the unskilful thought is destroyed there will be no time for reflection on the subject-of-meditation. But wise ones of old (*porāṇakā paṇḍitā*) destroyed unskilful thought having done building work too (*nava kammāni pana na paṭṭhāpetabbaṃ; kasmā? vitakke pacchinne kammaṭṭhāna-manasikārassa okāso na hoti*).

(There will be) no time (*okāso na hoti*) because of the making complete (or bringing to completion) of what is begun (*āraddhassa pariyosāpetabbato*). The bringing to an end of what is begun or not beginning (not



starting some new work) is the counsel of the elder (*āradhassa antagamaṇaṃ anārabho vā'ti theravādo*).

This is a story connected with building activity. The preceptor (*upajjhāya*) of Tissa, the novice, it is said was staying at the great monastery of the city of Tissa (Tissamahāvihāra; in South-east Ceylon).

“Reverend Sir”, said the novice to the preceptor, “I am dissatisfied.” Then the elder said to the novice: “Water for bathing is scarce, in this monastery. ‘Take me to Cittalapabbata (Cittala Hill).’ The novice did that There (at Cittalapabbata) the Thera told him: “This monastery is very largely property made over to the use of the Order as a whole (*saṅghika*). Make me a personal dwelling place.”

“Good, Reverend Sir,” said the novice. He began to do three things at once. The learning of the Saṃyutta Nikāya from the beginning; the clearing of a cave on a hill and work on the preliminary stage of practice on the meditation on fire (*tejokasīna-parikamma*), and reached absorption in the subject-of-meditation, learned the Saṃyutta Nikāya to the end, and finished clearing the cave. Having done all, he informed the preceptor about the completion of the tasks, The preceptor said: “Novice, it was done by you with difficulty. Today you yourself first stay there.”

The novice, while staying that night in the cave (he had cleared), having obtained suitable weather conditions, developed insight, reached arahatship and passed away,

just there (*tattheva parinibbāyi*).

Having taken his bones (*dhātuyo*), they (the people) built a shrine. To this day that shrine is known as the shrine of the elder Tissa (*Tissattheracetiyaṅṅ paññāyati*).

While exerting himself in clearing the cave just to check unskilful thoughts, in reciting the Saṃyutta Nikāya and in the practice of the preparatory part of the meditation on the fire-device for doing the work that precedes the function of seeing the truth through Stream-winning, he accumulated the merit of the three kinds of skilful action of body, speech and mind.

“The elder said: Water for bathing is scarce in this monastery. Take me to Cittalapabbata” having known the novice’s latent tendency (to good) and his particular meditation-device. Therefore, everything was effected according to his intention. (*Thero tassa āsayaṃ kasiṇaṅṅca savisesam jānitvā imasmiṅ vihārehi ādiṅ avoca. Tenasā yathādhippāyaṃ sabbaṃ sampāditaṃ*).

This is called the section dealing with “non-attention” on account of the explanation in it of the manner of checking the flow of unskilful thoughts by not attending to them (*asatiṅpabbāṅṅ nāma asatiyaṅṅ vitakka-niggahaṅṅa-vibhāvanato*).

He again said: “If evil unskilful thoughts continue to arise in a bhikkhu” and so forth in order to set forth the section of

“inquiry into the source of the unskilful thoughts” (*vitakka-mūla-bheda-pabbaṃ*).

The section of inquiry into the source of the unskilful thoughts is the making clear of the source of the source of unskilful thoughts (*vitakka-mūlassa tammūlassa ca bheda-vibhāvaṇaṃ*).

He should reflect on the removal of the thought source of those unskilful thoughts (*vitakka-saṅkhāra saṅṭhānaṃ manasikātabbaṃ*).

What is forming is formation (*saṅkhāro’ti saṅkhāro*), condition (*paccayo*), cause (*kāraṇaṃ*) source (*mūlaṃ*), is the meaning (*attho*). That state in which there is stopping or ending is stopping or ending (*santiṭṭhati etthā ti saṅṭhānaṃ*). (Removal is the stopping or ending of a thing in the sense of getting rid of it).

This is stated: What is the cause of this unskilful thought? What is its condition? By what reason has it arisen? Thinking thus, the source of the unskilful thoughts and the source of the source should be reflected on by the yogin.

Just as if, bhikkhus, a man should walk fast, and then to him it should occur thus: “But why do I walk fast? Now, let me walk slowly.” And as if, then, he should walk slowly and it should occur to him thus: “Why do I walk slowly? Now let me stand.” (*Seyyathāpi bhikkhave puriso sīghaṃ gaccheyya tassa evamassa kinnukho ahaṃ sīghaṃ gacchāmi yannunāhaṃ saṅikaṃ gaccheyyanti so saṅikaṃ gaccheyya, tassa evamassa kinnu kho*

*ahaṃ saṇikaṃ gaccheyya, tassa evamassa kinnu kho ahaṃ saṇikaṃ gacchāmi yannunāhaṃ tiṭṭheyyan'ti*. (The above is paraphrased in the translation of the discourse as follows: “Just as a man finding no reason for walking fast walks slowly: finding no reason for walking slowly, stands”).

“But why do I walk fast”: owing to what reason (or cause) do I walk fast?

“Now let me walk slowly”: He thinks thus: What profit is there to me by this fast walking? I shall walk slowly.

“And as if, then, he should walk slowly”; as if he, having thought in the foregoing way, should walk slowly. This is the method of explanation throughout (this simile).

The man’s walking fast is comparable to the bhikkhu’s entry into the state of unskilful thinking; the walking slowly, to the cutting off of unskilful thought-conduct (*vitakka-cāra*); [8] the standing, to the descent of the subject-of-meditation into the bhikkhu’s mind, with the cutting off of unskilful thought-conduct; the sitting down to the attainment of arahatship through the development of insight; the lying down, to passing the day in the attainment of the fruit that has Nibbāna for its object.

In him, who goes to (find) the source and the source of that source of unskilful thoughts questioning himself thus: “Possessed of what cause, due to what condition, are the unskilful thoughts?” there is a slackening of unskilful thoughts. (Owing to an access of energy), when the slackening of unskilful thought conduct reaches its highest

point, unskilful thoughts are entirely dissolved (*vitakkā sabbaso nirujjhanti*).

What produces unskilful thoughts is the source of unskilful thought (*vitakkaṃ saṅkhāroti vitakka-saṅkhāro*). It is the condition for unskilful thoughts (*vitakka-paccayo*), (and that condition is) unwise reflection (even) on the sensuously favourable etc. taking them as lovely etc. (*subhanimitādisu pi subhādina ayoniso manasikāro*).

The state, indeed, by which the production of unskilful thoughts ends is called (the ending or) the removal of the source of, unskilful thought (*so pana vitakka saṅkhāro santiṭṭhati ettha'ti vitakka-saṅkhāra saṅṭhānaṃ*). The source of unskilful thought is) the delusion of perceiving unlovely things and so forth as lovely and so forth (*asubhe subhanti ādi saññāvipallāso*). Therefore it is said: the source, and the source of that source, of thoughts should be reflected on (*tenāha vitakkānaṃ mūlañca mūlamūlañca manasikātabbaṃ*).

“In him who goes to (find) the source of unskilful thoughts” (*vitakkānaṃ mūlaṃ gacchantassa*) = in him who goes along the domain of knowledge; by way of investigation, to the root of wrong thoughts, to the cause of their arising (*upaparikkhana-vasena micchā vitakkānaṃ mūlaṃ, uppati-kāraṇaṃ ñāṇa-gatiyā gacchantassa*).

“There is a slackening of unskilful thought-conduct” (*vitakka-carō sīthilo hoti*). In him who knows according to reality, unskilful thoughts do not continuously proceed, as in the time before he knew truly (*yathāvato jānantassa pubbe viya abhiñhaṃ nappavattanti*).

“When the slackening of unskilful thought-conduct reaches its highest point” (*tasmim sīthilibhūte matthakaṃ gacchante*), through arriving at a stable state, gradually (*anukkamena thirabhāvappattiyā*).

Unskilful thoughts are entirely dissolved (*vitakkā sabbaso nirujjhanti*). Even all wrong thoughts go, do not assail one or owing to the completion of the meditation are eliminated without remainder (*micchā vitakkā sabbe pi gacchanti, na samudācaranti bhāvanā pāripuriyā va anavasesā pahīyanti*).

The meaning should be brought out through the “Daddabha birth-story.”

It is said that a ripe vilva fruit having been cut off from its stalk, fell close to the ear of a hare which was asleep at the foot of the vilva tree. Getting up on hearing that noise, it thought: “The earth is being destroyed,” and fled. The other beasts which were in front of him, fled, too, seeing the hare’s flight.

At that time the Bodhisatta was a lion and he thought: The earth is destroyed at the end of an aeon (*kappavināse*). “In the

interval (between the beginning and the end of an aeon) there is no destruction of the earth. Now, let me after going from source to source (*mūlā mūlaṃ gantvā*) find out (*anuvijjeyyaṃ*).

The lion questioned each animal separately beginning with the elephant. When he came to the hare, he asked: “Dear, did you see the earth being destroyed?” The hare: “Yes, lord.” The lion: “Come, friend, show.” The hare, “I am not able, sire.” Saying, “Hey, come; don’t fear,” the lion using gentle speech alternately with firm speech (*taddhamudukena*) took the hare along with him.

The hare standing not far from the vilva tree said: “May there be blessing to thee! In that place in which I stayed, it echoed. I do not know why it echoed.”

The Bodhisatta told the hare: “You stay here”, and went up to the tree. He saw where the hare had lain, saw the ripe (fallen) vilva fruit and looking upwards saw the fruit-stalk from which the fruit had fallen and concluded as follows: “This hare whilst lying asleep here got the idea that the earth was being destroyed when he heard the sound of the fruit that fell near his ear.” Then he questioned the hare to see if the facts he had found out were true. The hare said: “Yes, lord,” confirming the lion’s conclusions. The lion, thereupon, uttered this stanza:

The hare ran, after hearing the echoing sound  
of the vilva fruit that fell;  
“Having listened to the hare’s words, the army

of frightened beasts ran.”

After that the Bodhisatta comforted the beasts saying: “Don’t fear.” Thus unskilful thoughts are eliminated in him who goes (investigating things) from source to source.

It is said that beneath the place where the hare was sleeping there was a huge rat hole—a big excavation made by rats—and that the fruit falling on the ground above it caused a loud sound (*tassa kira sasakassa hetṭhā mahāmūsikāhi khata mahāvātaṃ ahoṣi; tenassa pātena mahāsaddo ahoṣi*).

With the repetition of the words, “If evil unskilful thoughts continue to arise,” the Master points out to the bhikkhu who fails to check the unskilful thoughts according to the instruction in the section of inquiring into the source of unskilful thoughts, another method.

**With clenched teeth** (*dantehi dantaṃ ādhāya*): with the upper teeth placed on the lower.

**The mind by the mind** (*cetasā cittaṃ*). The unskilful state of mind should be checked by the skilful state of mind.

**Strong man** (*balavā puriso*). Just as if a brawny man—a person with great physical strength—should, having caught hold of a weaker one by head or body, restrain, subdue and beat down that weaker person—make him wearied, exhausted and to faint—just so, should, the unskilful thoughts, be checked by the bhikkhu who wrestles with the



unskilful. Thoughts having overcome them saying, “Who are you and who am I,” and after whipping up great energy saying, “Let the flesh and blood of this body dry up; let skin sinews and bones, remain. “ To point out the foregoing meaning, the Master gave the simile of the strong man.

“By the skilful state of mind” (*kusala-cittena*) = by means of the mind associated with right thinking (*balavā sammā-saṅkappa-sampayuttana*).

“The unskilful state of mind” (*akusala-cittaṃ*) the ‘unskilful state of mind with such things like sensual thought (*kāma vitakka ādi sahitaṃ*).

Should be checked (*abhiniggahitabbaṃ*). Should after overcoming be checked. thus: in such a way that in the future no unskilful thoughts assail the bhikkhu. The state of the non-arising of things should be produced is the meaning (*yathā taṃ āyatim samudācāro na hoti evaṃ, abhibhāvito vā niggahetabbaṃ anuppatti— dhammatā āpadetabbā ti attho*).

**When, indeed, Bhikkhus** (*yato kho bhikkhave*). This is called the division of summing up (*pariyādānabhājanīyaṃ nāma*). The meaning of the phrase is even clear (*uṭṭhāna-mattameva*). [9]

The division of that which was pointed out from the beginning thus: “Five things should be reflected on from time to time, by the bhikkhu who is intent on

the higher consciousness”, by way of the (taking up completely) summing up of the time of reflection of his object mentioned in the passage.

As a teacher of archery <sup>[10]</sup> having taught the art of the five weapon: to a prince come from a foreign country spurs him on thus: “Go and take up the rulership of your country,” after showing him what ought to be done with the five weapons thus: “If robbers meet you on the way, use the bow; if that is destroyed or broken, use the spear, the sword ... and go (free).” And having done this, having gone (to his) own country taken up the rulership, the prince enjoys the fortune of sovereignty.

In just the same way the Blessed One taught what is in these five sections while spurring on the bhikkhu intent on the higher consciousness towards the realization of saintship.

If to the bhikkhu who is intent on the higher consciousness objects productive of unskilfulness (*akusalanimitta*) arise during his meditation he, having established himself in the instruction of the section of “the “different object” (*añña-nimitta-pabba*) and checked those unskilful thoughts will reach saintship after developing insight; unable to do it in that way, he will do it by the instruction of the section on disadvantages (*adīnava-pabba*); unable to do it in that way he will do it by the instruction of the section on non-attention and non-reflection (*asati-amanasikāra-pabba*); unable to do it in that way too, by the instruction of the section of searching the cause (*mūla-bheda-pabba*): unable to do it in that way too,

by the instruction of the section of restraining (*abhinigghanhaṇa-pabba*) he will develop insight and reach saintship.

**He is called a master of the paths taken by the courses of thought** (*vasī vitakkapariyāya-pathesu*). He is called one who is an expert of control in the paths taken by the course of thoughts, one who is conversant with the art of control in the paths taken by the courses of thought (*vitakka-carapathesu ciṇṇavasī paṇṇavasī ti vuccati*).

**The thought he wants (to think)** (*yaṃ vitakkaṃ ākaṅkhissati*). This was said to show his expertness of control. Formerly he was not able to think as he wanted and thought what he did not want to think about. Now, owing to his expertness in the control of thought, he is able to think as he wishes. Therefore it was said: The thoughts he will want to think, those thoughts he will think. The thoughts he will not want to think, those thoughts he will not think,

**He has cut off craving** (*acchejji taṇhan'ti*). This and the rest should be understood as taught in the Sabbāsava Suttanta Commentary.

# Notes

1. The commentarial passages (in bold) are translated from the Venerable Buddhaghosa's *Papañcasūdanī*, the commentary to the Majjhima Nikāya.
2. Passage indented, are 'marginal' notes taken from the Subcommentary (*ṭīkā*) to the Majjhima Nikāya.
3. This refers to the thirty-two parts of the body.
4. Majjhima Nikāya Sutta 21.
5. A 5:156/A III 185.
6. Itivuttaka sutta 91.
7. *Moha dhātu* is just *moha* (*ṭīkā*).
8. Might also be translated as 'unskilful thought-movement' or unskilful mental behaviour or conduct.
9. The commentary to the Sabbāsava Sutta, Majjhima Nikāya No. 2, has the following comment on "*yato kho bhikkhavo*." The "*to*" of "*yato*" is gen. in sense. "*Yato kho*"—"yassa kho" (of whom). That is said (by the commentator). But the ancient teachers (*porāṇā*) explain it by "in which time", when or what time (*yamhi kāle*).
10. *Satthācariyo'ti dhanubhedācariyo* (*ṭīkā*)—a master of weapon is a teacher of the knowledge of archery.

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# Table of Contents

Title page	2
The Removal of Distracting Thoughts	4
The Commentary to the Discourse on the Removal of Distracting Thoughts	9
Notes	36