

VITAKKASAṄṬHĀNA SUTTA, the discourse on "stilling thoughts", is the twentieth discourse in the *Majjhima Nikāya* (M. I, 119). A parallel to this discourse has been preserved in the Chinese *Madhyama Āgama* (T. I, 588a).¹ The title of the *Madhyama Āgama* version is "discourse on the higher mind", which would correspond to *Adhicitta Sutta* in Pāli. This title takes up the purpose of the altogether five methods for overcoming unwholesome thought described in both versions, which is to develop the higher mind, *adhicitta*.

The significance of the exposition offered in the *Vitakkasaṅṭhāna Sutta* and its Chinese parallel lies in these five methods for dealing with unwholesome thought (see also VITAKKA). The first of these recommends that, in case unwholesome thoughts arise, one should give attention to something wholesome instead in order to be able to develop one-pointedness of the mind. To illustrate this approach, the *Vitakkasaṅṭhāna Sutta* describes how a carpenter removes a coarse peg with a finer peg.² This simile conveys the sense of a gradual procedure. Just as the carpenter is not able to simply pull out the coarse peg, so the arising of unwholesome thoughts at times cannot simply be stopped. By way of a gradual approach, instead of attempting to stop thought one tries to change the object of thought, directing the flow of thoughts in the mind from what is unwholesome to what is wholesome. This will eventually lead to a stage where it is possible to leave behind wholesome thoughts as well in order to develop concentration, comparable to the carpenter taking out the fine peg, after it has performed its function of removing the coarse peg.

In case this first method does not work, the *Vitakkasaṅṭhāna Sutta* recommends to reflect on the danger inherent in allowing unwholesome thoughts to continue. This approach can be compared to a beautiful young man or woman, fond of ornaments, who finds that the corpse of a snake or a dog, or even of a human being, has been hung around his or her neck. This vivid imagery conveys the sense of urgency and also of shame that is appropriate in regard to the unbecoming nature of what is going on in a mind overwhelmed by unwholesome thoughts.

The third method, in case the earlier two have not been successful, is to just forget about these thoughts. This involves a conscious effort to set aside the issue

that is agitating the mind, comparable to someone who does not want to see something and therefore just closes the eyes or simply turns away.

The fourth method is to give attention to stilling the thought formations, *vitakkasaṅkhārasaṅṭhāna*. The implications of this expression require some interpretation, based on the simile given to illustrate this particular method. This simile describes someone who is walking fast. On reflecting, this person might wonder why he or she is walking so fast and decide to rather walk in a slow manner. Further reflection might lead to the decision to stand still, or even sit down, or to lie down. The point of the simile seems to be that through becoming aware of what is taking place, this person is able to let go of the strain of unnecessary activity and abandon an uncomfortable posture for a more comfortable posture. Applied to the case of the recurrent arising of unwholesome thoughts, this would then imply giving attention to how these thoughts agitate the mind. Clear awareness of this would lead on to inquiring why these thoughts are being entertained, comparable to wondering why one is walking so fast. That is, the volitional driving force behind those thoughts is being given attention and being put into question. Clear awareness of the thought process, *vitakka*, and the volitional driving force behind it, *saṅkhāra*, enables to calm both and bring about their stilling, *saṅṭhāna*.

Should all these methods prove to be unsuccessful, as a last resort the *Vitakkasaṅṭhāna Sutta* recommends the use of force of the mind to expel unwholesome thoughts, comparable to a strong man who takes hold of a weak man and overpowers him. Notably, the same method is described elsewhere among a set of practice that the Buddha tried out before his awakening, but which did not lead him to liberation (M. I, 242). This makes it clear why the *Vitakkasaṅṭhāna Sutta* presents this forceful approach only as a last resort, when all the other methods have failed to overcome the recurrent arising of unwholesome thoughts. Even though forceful restraint of the mind on its own will not lead to awakening, it has its proper place at the present juncture since the unwholesome thoughts are evidently so strong that the mind is completely overwhelmed. To stop them through the use of force will at least ensure that these unwholesome thoughts will not spill over into some unwholesome activity. To use a modern example, the forceful method is somewhat like an emergency brake. Though an

emergency brake will certainly not lead to actual progress in one's journey, it has its proper place in order to avoid an accident.

A noteworthy difference between the *Vitakkasaṅghāna Sutta* and its Chinese parallel occurs at the very end, where the Pāli version concludes its description of mastery over thoughts by indicating that in this way an end of *dukkha* has been reached and craving has been eradicated, *accheccchi taphaṃ... antam-akāsi dukkhassa* (*M. I*, 122). In the otherwise similar Chinese conclusion, this statement is not found at all (*T. I*, 589a8). Closer inspection of the Pāli passage brings to light a grammatical inconsistency, in that the overcoming of craving etc. are formulated in the past tense, whereas the earlier described mastery over one's thought is in the future tense (*yaṃ vitakkaṃ ākaṅkhissati, taṃ vitakkaṃ vitakkessati*). For the removal of craving to stand in a meaningful relation to mastery over thought, the use of the tenses should be in the opposite way. This suggests that the ending of the Pāli version may have suffered from some error during oral transmission.

In fact, mastery over unwholesome thoughts on its own would not suffice for reaching awakening, for which a more extended training of the mind through the development of insight and tranquility is required. Mastery over unwholesome thought, for whose development the *Vitakkasaṅghāna Sutta* offers a graded series of five methods, stands in its proper place as what provides the necessary foundation for the path that will eventually ripen in liberation.

Anālayo

References

- 1 *T.* stands for the Taishō edition.
- 2 The Chinese version at *T. I*, 588a14 instead speaks of a carpenter drawing a straight line on a piece of wood and then cutting the wood straight.

VIVĀDA stands for "quarrel" and "disputation". The causes that lead to quarrel and disputation are analysed in several discourses. One such analysis lists altogether six roots of disputation, *vivādam ūlāni* (*D. III*, 246; *M. II*, 245 and *A. III*, 334). According to these six roots of disputation, quarrelling can arise when someone is

angry and scornful; or else when someone is hypocritical and malicious; envious and mean; cunning and crafty; with evil desires and wrong views; or when someone stubbornly and dogmatically clings to his or her own view.

An example for the last case can be found in the *Bahuvēdaniya Sutta*, which reports two disciples of the Buddha unable to come to an agreement on how many types of feeling the Buddha had taught. When informed of how each of them had insisted on his particular interpretation, the Buddha clarified that both were correct in as much as he had taught both ways of reckoning feelings. At the same time, both disciples were wrong in that they had dogmatically insisted on their particular interpretation instead of acknowledging the appropriateness of the presentation made by the other, an attitude that was bound to lead to conflict, litigation and disputation, *vivāda* (*M. I*, 398).

Disagreements or even misrepresentations of the teachings have a considerable potential of leading to disputation (*A. V*, 77). *Vinaya* matters could also lead to *vivāda*, such as when a monk declares that an offence is not an offence, or presents what indeed is not an offence as an offence, or else when the seriousness of a particular offence is being misrepresented (*A. V*, 78).

The degree to which *Vinaya* matters can lead to quarrel can be seen in the case of the monks from Kosambī, where a relatively minor offence committed by a monk led to such strife among the local monastic community that even a personal intervention by the Buddha was unable to settle the matter (*Vin. I*, 337ff). According to the *Kosambiya Sutta*, the Buddha pointed out that for the Kosambī monks to quarrel in this way was for their own detriment as well as for the detriment of others, enjoining them to instead dwell with loving kindness by way of body, speech and mind towards each other (*M. I*, 321). In addition to loving kindness, generosity in sharing one's material gains, maintenance of flawless moral conduct and noble view are factors that conduce to living together in harmony and peace.

A discourse in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* further expands on this topic. This discourse also takes its occasion from a group of monks that had been engaged in quarrelling and disputation. Rebuking them for their unbecoming conduct, the Buddha recommended several qualities that lead to communal harmony (*A. V*, 89).

ENCYCLOPAEDIA OF BUDDHISM

Founder Editor-in Chief

G. P. MALALASEKERA, M. A., Ph. D., D. Litt., Professor Emeritus

Editor-in Chief

W. G. WEERARATNE, M. A., Ph. D.

VOLUME VIII

FASCICLE 3 : Vācā – Z hong a-han



2009