

MN 20: Vitakkasaṅḥāna Sutta

The Stabilization¹ of Thought

Translated by Suddhāso Bhikkhu

Thus have I heard. On one occasion the Blessed One was dwelling at Sāvatti, at Jeta's Grove, in Anāthapiṇḍika's Park. There the Blessed One addressed the monks: “Monks!” “Auspicious sir,” those monks replied to the Blessed One. The Blessed One said this:

“Monks, there are five objects of awareness² to be given attention to from time to time by a monk who is committed to [developing] a heightened mind. What five? Here, monks, when harmful, unwholesome thoughts connected with desire, aversion, and delusion arise in a monk due to a [particular] object of awareness, from paying attention to a [particular] object of awareness, then, monks, that monk is to shift his attention from that object of awareness to another object of awareness that is connected with [something] wholesome. When he shifts his attention from that object of awareness to another object of awareness that is connected with [something] wholesome, those harmful, unwholesome thoughts connected with desire, aversion, and delusion are abandoned, and they disappear. From their abandoning, the mind becomes internally stable,³ settled, unified, and concentrated. Monks, just like a skilled carpenter or carpenter's apprentice strikes away, knocks out, and does away with a coarse peg using a refined peg, in the same way, monks, when harmful, unwholesome thoughts connected with desire, aversion, and delusion arise in a monk due to a [particular] object of awareness, from paying attention to a [particular] object of awareness, then, monks, that monk is to shift his attention from that object of awareness to another object of awareness that is connected with [something] wholesome. When he shifts his attention from that object of awareness to another object of awareness that is connected with [something] wholesome, those harmful, unwholesome thoughts connected with desire, aversion, and delusion are abandoned, and they disappear. From their abandoning, the mind becomes internally stable, settled, unified, and concentrated.

“Monks, when that monk shifts his attention from that object of awareness to another object of awareness that is connected with [something] wholesome, if harmful, unwholesome thoughts connected with desire, aversion, and delusion still arise, then, monks, that monk is to consider the disadvantages of those thoughts, [thinking] “These thoughts are unwholesome, these thoughts are blameworthy, these thoughts result in dissatisfaction.”⁴ When he considers the disadvantages of those thoughts, those harmful, unwholesome thoughts connected with desire, aversion, and delusion are abandoned, and they disappear. From their abandoning, the mind becomes internally stable, settled, unified, and concentrated. Monks, just like a young woman or young man who is naturally

1 *Sanḥāna*. From *saṃ* (complete) + *ṭhāna* (standing). The title of this sutta is sometimes rendered as “removal” of thought; however, the word *sanḥāna* is never used to mean “removal.” It may be fair to translate it as “stilling” or “tranquilizing,” but even that is somewhat overstepping the bounds of the word's meaning. See note 3 below, on *santiṭṭhati*.

2 *Nimitta*. In this context, this word appears to mean whatever one is paying attention to, whether internal or external; thus it is translated as “object of awareness.”

3 *Santiṭṭhati*. From *saṃ* (complete) + *tiṭṭhati* (stands). The relationship between this word and the title of the sutta is evident. As *santiṭṭhati* clearly means “stabilizes” in this context, this lends support to the translation of the sutta title as “stabilization of thought.”

4 *Dukkha-vipāka*. Lit. “painful result.”

fond of adornments would be upset, humiliated, and disgusted if a snake corpse, dog corpse, or human corpse was tied to their neck, in the same way, monks, when that monk shifts his attention from that object of awareness to another object of awareness that is connected with [something] wholesome, if harmful, unwholesome thoughts connected with desire, aversion, and delusion still arise, then, monks, that monk is to consider the disadvantages of those thoughts, [thinking] 'These thoughts are unwholesome, these thoughts are blameworthy, these thoughts result in dissatisfaction.' When he considers the disadvantages of those thoughts, those harmful, unwholesome thoughts connected with desire, aversion, and delusion are abandoned, and they disappear. From their abandoning, the mind becomes internally stable, settled, unified, and concentrated.

“Monks, when that monk is considering the disadvantages of those thoughts, if harmful, unwholesome thoughts connected with desire, aversion, and delusion still arise, then, monks, that monk is to ignore those thoughts and pay no attention to them. When he ignores those thoughts and pays no attention to them, those harmful, unwholesome thoughts connected with desire, aversion, and delusion are abandoned, and they disappear. From their abandoning, the mind becomes internally stable, settled, unified, and concentrated. Monks, just like a person with eyes who wants to stop seeing objects that have come into his field of view might close his eyes or look away, in the same way, monks, when that monk is considering the disadvantages of those thoughts, if harmful, unwholesome thoughts connected with desire, aversion, and delusion still arise, they are abandoned, and they disappear. From their abandoning, the mind becomes internally stable, settled, unified, and concentrated.

“Monks, when that monk is ignoring those thoughts and paying no attention to them, if harmful, unwholesome thoughts connected with desire, aversion, and delusion still arise, then, monks, that monk is to pay attention to the stabilizing of the thought-producers⁵ of those thoughts. When he pays attention to the stabilizing of the thought-producers of those thoughts, those harmful, unwholesome thoughts connected with desire, aversion, and delusion are abandoned, and they disappear. From their abandoning, the mind becomes internally stable, settled, unified, and concentrated. Monks, just like a person who is walking quickly might think, 'Why do I walk quickly? Perhaps I should walk slowly.' So he walks slowly. He might think, 'Why do I walk slowly? Perhaps I should stand still.' So he stands still. He might think, 'Why am I standing? Perhaps I should sit down.' So he sits down. He might think, 'Why am I sitting? Perhaps I should lay down.' So he lays down. In this way, monks, a person replaces coarse postures with refined postures. In the same way, monks, when that monk is ignoring those thoughts and paying no attention to them, if harmful, unwholesome thoughts connected with desire, aversion, and delusion still arise, they are abandoned, and they disappear. From their abandoning, the mind becomes internally stable, settled, unified, and concentrated.

“Monks, when that monk is paying attention to the stabilizing of the thought-producers of those thoughts, if harmful, unwholesome thoughts connected with desire, aversion, and delusion still arise, then, monks, that monk is to clench his teeth, press his tongue against

5 *Vitakka-saṅkhāra*. The word *saṅkhāra* is from *saṃ* (complete/together) + *kāra* (making/doing/acting), and allows a wide range of possible translations. In this case *saṅkhāra* appears to be used to mean that which produces thought, and thus is rendered as “producer.” Renderings such as “thought-formations” or “thought-conditioners” seem overly passive and appear to miss the intended meaning.

the roof of his mouth, and mentally restrain, subdue, and overpower the mind. When he clenches his teeth, presses his tongue against the roof of his mouth, and mentally restrains, subdues, and overpowers the mind, those harmful, unwholesome thoughts connected with desire, aversion, and delusion are abandoned, and they disappear. From their abandoning, the mind becomes internally stable, settled, unified, and concentrated. Monks, just like a strong man might grab a weaker man's head, neck, or shoulder and restrain, subdue, and overpower him, in the same way, monks, when that monk is paying attention to the stabilizing of the thought-producers of those thoughts, if harmful, unwholesome thoughts connected with desire, aversion, and delusion still arise, then, monks, that monk is to clench his teeth, press his tongue against the roof of his mouth, and mentally restrain, subdue, and overpower the mind. When he clenches his teeth, presses his tongue against the roof of his mouth, and mentally restrains, subdues, and overpowers the mind, those harmful, unwholesome thoughts connected with desire, aversion, and delusion are abandoned, and they disappear. From their abandoning, the mind becomes internally stable, settled, unified, and concentrated.

“Monks, when harmful, unwholesome thoughts connected with desire, aversion, and delusion arise in a monk due to a [particular] object of awareness, from paying attention to a [particular] object of awareness, then when that monk shifts his attention from that object of awareness to another object of awareness that is connected with [something] wholesome, those harmful, unwholesome thoughts connected with desire, aversion, and delusion are abandoned, and they disappear. From their abandoning, the mind becomes internally stable, settled, unified, and concentrated.

“When he considers the disadvantages of those thoughts... When he ignores those thoughts and pays no attention to them... When he pays attention to the stabilizing of the thought-producers of those thoughts... When he clenches his teeth, presses his tongue against the roof of his mouth, and mentally restrains, subdues, and overpowers the mind, those harmful, unwholesome thoughts connected with desire, aversion, and delusion are abandoned, and they disappear. From their abandoning, the mind becomes internally stable, settled, unified, and concentrated.

“Monks, this is called a monk who is in control of all his patterns of thought.⁶ He will think whatever thought he wishes to think; he will not think whatever thought he does not wish to think. Craving has been severed, the fetters have been removed, and through the appropriate understanding of conceit,⁷ dissatisfaction⁸ has been terminated.”

This is what the Blessed One said. Satisfied, those monks delighted in the Blessed One's speech.

6 *Vitakka-pariyāya-pathā*. Lit. “thought-method-paths.”

7 *Sammā mānā'bhisamayā*.

8 *Dukkha*. This includes the entire range of negative experiences, from a slight sense of discomfort to utter torment.