

MN 20: Vitakkasaṅḥāna Sutta (Annotated)

The Stabilization¹ of Thought

Translated and Annotated 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:

This is a standard opening sequence for a Sutta - the location is identified, and the Buddha addresses his audience. As the Buddha spent most of his time with other monks, most of his discourses are addressed to monks (as in this case). This does not mean that the teachings within this discourse are only for monks, however; they are equally applicable to all dedicated Buddhist practitioners of any gender, whether or not they are ordained.

"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 the subject of this discourse is introduced, with very little initial explanation. All we know at this point is that there will be five things mentioned, and that they are relevant to any practitioner who is attempting to develop a "heightened mind" (Pāli: *adhicitta*). This term (*adhicitta*) is most commonly found as part of a triplet: "heightened virtue" (*adhisīla*), "heightened mind" (*adhicitta*), and "heightened discernment" (*adhipaññā*).*

*The only place in the Suttas where "heightened mind" is described is in the Aṅguttara Nikāya, where it is defined as the four states of deep concentration called *Jhāna* (AN 3.90 and 3.91). Thus we can conclude that this discourse is about five methods for helping a meditation practitioner develop concentration.*

"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.

Occasionally, when we are attempting to practice meditation, we experience unwholesome and distracting thoughts of various kinds: thoughts about what we

1 *Saṅḥāna*. From *saṃ* (complete) + *ṭhāna* (standing). The title of this sutta is sometimes rendered as "removal" of thought; however, the word *saṅḥāna* 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."

want, thoughts about what we dislike, speculative thoughts, meandering thoughts... as soon as we notice that we have gotten off track in this manner, then it is time to reestablish the mind's focus. The first method the Buddha provides in this discourse is to replace whatever we were focusing on with something else. So if focusing your mind on attractive members of your preferred gender leads to thoughts of sexual desire – thus breaking your concentration – then it's time to switch your mind to something else that will not provoke the mind in that way. Or if recollecting the mistreatment you've been given by others leads to anger and resentment towards those people, then once again, it is time to focus your mind on something else.

This first technique is one of “replacement” - replacing an inappropriate focus with a more appropriate one: a neutral focus, or something directly opposed to the unwholesome thought that is present.

Some examples of neutral objects: mindfulness of one's body, mindfulness of breathing, or contemplation of impermanence. The first two are useful for developing concentration, and the third for developing wisdom. When one focuses the mind on such things, the unwholesome thought will quickly fade and disappear. These techniques are universally applicable regardless of what kind of thought or emotion is distracting you; as long as your attention is completely focused on the object, there will be no unwholesome thoughts.

Some examples of objects that counteract specific unwholesome thoughts: loving-friendliness and compassion to overcome anger and resentment, recollecting the unattractiveness of the body to overcome sexual desire, or contemplating the unsatisfying nature of the world to overcome discontent. These techniques are particularly useful when one is overcome by a strong negative emotion, as they work to directly oppose particular unwholesome tendencies. However, be careful with these techniques; developing thoughts of loving-friendliness towards a person that you are sexually attracted to can provoke lust, and contemplating the unattractiveness of the body can provoke aversion. Carefully pay attention to the effect that such meditation objects are having on the mind, and pick something else to focus on if the present object is leading in an unwholesome direction. If used correctly, however, these are wholesome objects of awareness because they encourage the development of loving-friendliness, compassion, renunciation, and contentment.

“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.

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

This is the goal of this stage of practice: a mind that is stable, settled, unified, and concentrated. It is only with such a mind that one is able to develop wisdom and insight. So even though this state is very enjoyable to experience, it is not the final goal, but rather a stepping-stone to true understanding and unshakable happiness.

“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.

This evocative simile illustrates the first method quite nicely: imagine a misshapen piece of wood wedged in a knothole. One takes a new piece of wood which is carefully shaped to fill the hole perfectly, lines it up with the misshapen piece, and with a tap of one's mallet knocks away the misshapen piece, replacing it completely.

In the same way, one uses a wholesome focus of mind to knock away and completely replace an unwholesome focus of mind, so that one may stabilize, unify, and concentrate one's mind.

“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

However, sometimes our efforts to replace harmful focal points with beneficial ones are ineffectual. The object of focus may be particularly enticing or compelling, and we find it difficult to shift our attention to something else. Thus the Buddha offers another option: to actively consider the drawbacks of those unwholesome thoughts – the self-destructive nature of indulging in greed, hatred, and delusion, and the fact that engaging in such thoughts prevents us from developing concentration and insight.

“When he considers the disadvantages of those thoughts, those harmful,

⁴ *Dukkha-vipāka*. Lit. “painful result.” So one could also translate this last phrase as “These thoughts produce a painful result” or “These thoughts lead to an unpleasant result.”

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 fond of adornments would be upset, humiliated, and disgusted if the corpse of a snake, dog, or human 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.

Here we see the Buddha's simile for the second method: a young person who likes to appear attractive finds a dead body draped around their neck. Naturally they would be disgusted and embarrassed, and would remove it right away. In the same way, we want to have a bright, clear, pure mind; so when we find toxic thoughts polluting our mind, we naturally tend to see them as repulsive and wish to remove them as quickly as possible.

However, be careful not to produce hatred or negativity on this account, as this is simply producing further unwholesome mindstates. It is also important not to fall into self-criticism - "I'm bad at meditation, I can't keep these harmful thoughts out of my mind" - as that is aversion towards oneself. Simply recognize the unwholesome thoughts as toxic and make an effort to rid yourself of them for your own sake; and cultivate self-forgiveness: a willingness to let go of our past mistakes instead of holding a grudge against ourselves.

“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.

The third method the Buddha gives is a simple one: non-participation. Thoughts come and go all the time; they arise in the mind, and if we do not feed them or fuel them in any way, they disappear almost immediately. So when unwholesome thoughts arise, we just don't get involved in them.

This simple technique is extremely powerful as long as we are honest with ourselves about our level of involvement. Whenever an interesting or engaging

thought arises, we tend to latch on to it to one extent or another; we may not think that we're causing the thought to persist, when in truth we are subtly 'feeding' it, encouraging it to stick around because of our emotional investment in it or its subject matter. Instead, detach completely from the thought, to sever any shred of interest in it that we might have. This can be difficult, especially if it's a thought that we consider important: a fascinating idea, or a problem in our lives, or a relationship, or something to do with our livelihood. In those situations it can be useful to remind ourselves: "Now is not the time." "It can wait." "I can deal with that later."

If the thoughts are extremely persistent and we're worried that we might forget something truly important, then it may be useful to keep a notepad and pen next to us when we meditate, so we can write down the idea and let it go from our mind without fear of forgetting something important. However, if we find that we do this repeatedly during our meditation sessions, then it's best to stick to trying to restrain the mind internally, as frequently stopping to write things down tends to disrupt tranquility and handicap the development of concentration.

"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.

For this simple technique, the Buddha uses a simple simile: when you don't want to see something, don't look at it.

In the same way, if you don't want a thought to persist, don't get involved in it.

"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?

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.

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.

When we read the Buddha's simile, then the fourth method becomes clear: this method is one of reduction - reducing the intensity of unwholesome thoughts. So just as a runner slows to walking, and a walker slows to standing; in the same way, we try to throttle back the harmful thoughts in our mind. For example, if we're caught up in anger and resentment - "I hate them so much, they're so stupid and cruel!" - then we can try to reduce it to pity: "It's too bad that those silly people are so cruel, they don't even realize how much they're harming themselves." With effort we can then take it one step farther, to genuine compassion: "May those people develop wisdom and kindness! May they be happy and free from suffering!"

"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.

There are times when none of the aforementioned methods work, no matter how hard we try. The Buddha gives us one more last-ditch method, to use when all else fails: dominate the mind with sheer willpower.

One example of this method is to pick a short phrase (such as "May everyone be happy," or "Tranquility," or "May peace prevail," or whatever works for you) and mentally repeat it over and over. This resembles the mantra-meditation used in some sects of Buddhism (as well as some non-Buddhist systems). However, in this case there is no esoteric significance to the word or phrase chosen; in fact, you could pick something totally meaningless and it would still have the desired effect. The purpose is simply to wipe out the unwholesome thoughts, to drown them out with sheer persistence and volume. Once the unwanted thoughts have been eliminated, stop the internal recitation and resume one's meditation practice.

"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.

The simile the Buddha gives illustrates the forcefulness of this method: it is like a strong man physically overpowering a weak man. It is worth remembering that this is the method of last resort; it is better to use the first four techniques, and to revert to this final method only if the first four do not work.

“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.

These passages are a recap of the five methods. To summarize:

1. *Replacement - one replaces the unwholesome thought with a wholesome one, such as a thought of kindness, compassion, or renunciation.*
2. *Reflection - one reflects on the harmful, poisonous, self-destructive nature of such unwholesome thoughts.*
3. *Non-participation - one completely ceases to participate in the unwholesome thought; it usually fades almost immediately when we stop feeding it.*
4. *Reduction - one gradually reduces the intensity of the unwholesome thought, such as by reducing anger to pity, and then pity to compassion.*
5. *Domination - one overpowers the unwholesome thought by sheer force of will; for example, by repeating a short phrase over and over in one's mind until the unwholesome thought has disappeared.*

“Monks, this is called a monk who is in control of all his patterns of thought. 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, suffering has been brought to an end.”

This describes the potential benefits of making the effort to remove unwholesome thoughts from the mind, and to develop mental stability, unity, and focus: we become capable of cutting off our craving and removing the inner attachments we have that keep us tied to painful forms of existence.

The fetters (saṃyojana) that the Buddha mentions here are ten in number:

1. Identification with body and mind (sakkāya-diṭṭhi)
2. Wrong grasp of habitual practices (sīlabbata-parāmāsa)
3. Skeptical doubt (vicikicchā)
4. Interest in sensuality (kāmacchanda)
5. Aversion (vyāpāda)
6. Desire for physical existence (rūpa-rāga)
7. Desire for non-physical existence (arūpa-rāga)
8. Conceit (māna)
9. Agitation (uddhacca)
10. Ignorance (avijjā)

These are the ten things we need to overcome in order to attain freedom from suffering. They can be divided into three groups: the first three are overcome upon attaining the first stage of enlightenment; the fourth and fifth are overcome upon attaining the second and third stage of enlightenment; and the last five are overcome upon attaining the fourth stage – full enlightenment. So by saying that the practices outlined in this discourse are conducive to removing the fetters, the Buddha is implicitly stating that they are conducive to attaining enlightenment.

Similarly, by stating “through the appropriate understanding of conceit,” the Buddha singles out the most important fetter: conceit (māna), which is often further specified as the belief in self-existence (asmi-māna). The belief in self-existence is the root cause of all of our suffering; its elimination is synonymous with full enlightenment and thus with freedom from suffering.

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