MN 20 — Vitakkasanthana Sutta: The Removal of Distracting Thoughts

English translation by Soma Thera.

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Text

Thus have I heard. At one time the Blessed One was staying at Savatthi, in Jeta's Grove, Anathapindika'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 unskillful 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 unskillful 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 unskillful 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 unskillful 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 unskillful thoughts thus: Truly these thoughts of mine are unskillful, blameworthy, and productive of misery. Then the evil unskillful 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 unskillful thoughts continue to arise in spite of his reflection on the object which is connected with skill, ponder on the disadvantages of unskillful thoughts thus: Truly, these thoughts of mine are unskillful, blameworthy, and productive of misery. Then the evil, unskillful 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, unskillful thoughts continue to arise in a bhikkhu who ponders on their disadvantageousness, he should in regard to them, endeavor to be without attention and reflection. Then the evil unskillful 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, unskillful thoughts continue to arise in spite of his pondering on their disadvantageousness, endeavor to be without attention and reflection as regards them. Then the evil, unskillful 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, unskillful thoughts continue to arise in a bhikkhu in spite of his endeavor to be without attention and reflection as regards evil, unskillful thoughts, he should reflect on the removal of the (thought) source of those unskillful thoughts. Then the evil, unskillful 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; finding no reason for sitting down, lies down, and thus getting rid of a posture rather uncalm resorts to a restful posture, just so should the bhikkhu in whom evil, unskillful thoughts arise, in spite of his

endeavor to be without attention and reflection regarding them, reflect on the removal of the (thought) source of those unskillful thoughts. Then the evil, unskillful 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, unskillful thoughts continue to arise in a bhikkhu in spite of his reflection on the removal of a source of unskillful 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, unskillful 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, unskillful thoughts continue to arise in spite of his reflection on the source of unskillful 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, unskillful 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 unskillful 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 unskillful thoughts, his endeavoring to be without attentiveness and reflection as regards 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 along which thoughts travel. 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 down 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.