

(*Visuddhimagga*) alone would have secured for him undying fame. (*Buddhaghosuppatti*, Introduction PTS 1894 p. 31).

**Ancillary Works of *Visuddhimagga*:** Several ancillary works are written around this important work. The sub-commentary (*ṭīkā*) on the *Visuddhimagga* was written by Ācārya Dhammapāla of Badaratiṭṭha and named it *Paramatthamaññusā*. The Burmese "*Gandhavaṃsa*" speaks of a *Visuddhimagga Saṅkhepa ṭīkā* (abridged sub commentary on the *Visuddhimagga*) written by a Mahā Thera resident at Mahindasoma Pirivena in the reign of King Parākramabāhu (1153-86). This book is not extant today. A Sinhala "*sappā*" (paraphrase) was written by the erudite King Parākramabāhu of Dambadeniya (1236-1271). According to the Pali *Thūpavaṃsa* there has been an abridged *Visuddhimagga (saṅkhepa Visuddhimagga)* written before the reign of king Parākramabāhu (1153-86); but it is not extant. Burmese *Gandhavaṃsa* records the existence of a *Visuddhimagga Ganthi* (Glossary of *Visuddhimagga*). Its Burmese translation was written by Narindabhisiri Dhammadvaja Mahā Dhammarājādhirājadaguru Thera in 1776. An English translation by Ven. Bhikkhu Ñānamoli named "Path of Purification" is existing in Sri Lanka written in 1956. The PTS has published an English translation by Pe Maung Tin under the title "Path of Purity. The text of the *Visuddhimagga* is published by the PTS, edited by Mrs. C.A.F. Rhys Davids in 1920.

#### K. Arunasiri

**VITAKKA**, "thought", is derived from the prefix *vi* and *takka*, which stands for "reasoning". In its usage in the early discourses, *takka* often has a negative sense, representing the kind of theoretical speculation and sophistry that can lead to erroneous conclusions and wrong views, as described for example in the *Brahmajāla Sutta* (D. I, 16ff).<sup>1</sup> Hence *takka* is seen as one of several unreliable sources of knowledge (A. I, 189). The use of the term *vitakka*, however, does not necessarily carry a negative sense. Here it is mostly the context that decides whether a particular instance of *vitakka* should be seen in a negative or in a positive light.

This to some extent stands symptomatic for the early Buddhist attitude towards thought and

conceptions, in that clear awareness of their limitations does not lead to a wholesale rejection. In fact, *vitakka* fulfils an important role in the Buddhist path, a path that eventually leads to what is beyond thought, *atakkāvacara* (e.g. M. I, 167). This pragmatic attitude towards *vitakka* as an important but limited tool pervades the early Buddhist analysis of its significance and manifestations. Important aspects of this analysis are the early Buddhist ethical perspective on *vitakka*, the psychological analysis of its arising, the role of *vitakka* in the context of *jhāna*, and various imageries related to the term. In what follows, these topics will be treated in turn.

#### The Ethical Perspective on *Vitakka*

The early Buddhist ethical perspective on *vitakka* is, according to the *Dvedhāvītakka Sutta*, a direct outcome of the Buddha's pre-awakening experiences. According to this discourse, during the time of his quest for liberation the bodhisattva developed a clear distinction between unwholesome thoughts related to sensuality, to ill-will or to harming; and wholesome thoughts related to renunciation, the absence of ill-will or harmlessness (M. I, 114). The rationale behind this distinction is that the former - thoughts related to sensuality, ill-will and harming - will lead to affliction for oneself and for others, and to loss of wisdom. In short, such types of *Mvitakka* lead away from *Nibbāna*. Based on this clear distinction, the bodhisattva made a determined effort to overcome unwholesome thoughts as part of his progress to liberation.

It is this same distinction that informs the injunction to develop intentions of renunciation, non ill-will and harmlessness as the second factor of the noble eightfold path (e.g. M. III, 251). This shows the fundamental role of this ethical perspective on thoughts and intentions as a means for progress on the path. Hence one of the methods to counter the influxes, according to the *Sabbāsava Sutta*, is precisely not permitting that thoughts related to sensuality, ill-will and harming remain in the mind, firmly opposing them and removing them (M. I, 11). The proper attitude towards such thoughts is exemplified by the attitude of King Mahāsudassanā, who before retiring for meditation told himself: "Stay here, thoughts of sensuality, ill-will and harming, thus far only, thoughts of sensuality, ill-will and harming", *tiṭṭha kāma-vitakka, tiṭṭha vyāpāda-vitakka, tiṭṭha vihiṃsā vitakka! Ettāvatā*

*kāma-vitakka, ettāvatā vyāpāda-vitakka, ettāvatā vihiṃsā vitakka* (D. II, 186).

The early Buddhist analysis of thought does, however, not exhaust itself in treating only unwholesome thoughts. In fact, the whole purpose of the discourses preserved in the canonical collections is to encourage the development of wholesome thought and reflection. The teachings delivered by the Buddha or his disciples, originally given orally, need to be born in mind and reflected upon in order to lead to progress on the path. Such reflection constitutes one out of five spheres of liberation, *vimuttāyatana*. Here liberation of the mind takes place based on having reflected on the teachings one has heard, *yathāsutaṃ yathāpariyattaṃ dhammaṃ cetasā anuvitakketi anuvicarati* (A. III, 23). Through reflecting in this way, joy and gladness manifest in the mind, which lead to tranquillity and concentration as a basis for breaking through to liberating insight.

A particularly recommendable set of thoughts comprises the eight thoughts of a superior man, *mahāpurisavitakka*. According to these eight thoughts, the Buddha's teaching is for one of little desires, one who is content and secluded, energetic and mindful, concentrated and wise, and, above all, for one who does not delight in conceptual proliferation, *nippapañ carāma* (A. IV, 229).

#### The Arising of *Vitakka*

According to the analysis of thought given in the *Dvedhāvītakka Sutta*, whatever one frequently thinks about will lead to a corresponding inclination of the mind, *yaññad' eva ... bahulam anuvitakketi anuvicāreti, tathā tathā nati hoti cetaso* (M. I, 115). As the *Dvedhāvītakka Sutta* explains, to frequently think of sensually alluring matters or else of things that cause ill-will and irritation will strengthen the mental tendency that is responsible for the arising of such types of thought. The way out of this vicious circle of thought leading to an inclination, which then causes further thought, lies in awareness of what takes place, followed by a determined effort to not allow unwholesome thoughts to continue.

The development of insight into the nature of thought requires in particular being aware of thoughts as they arise, are present for a short while, and then pass away, *viditā vitakkā uppajjanti, viditā upaṭṭhahanti, viditā abbattham gacchanti* (A. II, 45).

Practising in this way leads to mindfulness and clear comprehension, *sampajañña*, and constitutes one of the requirements for the four types of analytical knowledge, *pañsambhidā* (A. IV, 33).

In regard to the arising of unwholesome thoughts, an important factor is perception, *saññā*. According to the analysis given in the *Samaṇamañḍikā Sutta*, the arising of unwholesome thoughts and intentions is due to a corresponding type of perception (M. II, 27). That is, a central root of unwholesome thought processes lies in the way perception evaluates experience.

Arisen based on a particular type of perception, *vitakka* has the propensity of leading on to *papañca*, conceptual proliferation (M. I, 112), which in turn manifests in ever more thoughts of the same type (D. II, 277). As the *Madhupiṇḍika Sutta* clarifies, delight in conceptual proliferations and related perceptions is responsible for quarrel and litigations, for the taking up of rods and weapons, as well as for malicious words and false speech (M. I, 109). Thus when monks quarrel amongst each other, the conclusion can be drawn that they have not developed the three wholesome types of thoughts, and instead have been dwelling frequently in thoughts related to sensuality, ill-will and harming (A. I, 275). Hence be it when walking, standing, seated or lying down, unwholesome thoughts should not be allowed to continue (It. 115).

In fact, to keep unwholesome thoughts out of the mind requires a determined attitude. This is due to the dynamics responsible for the arising of thought, which only too often takes place without conscious deliberation. "My" thoughts and ideas on closer inspection turn out to be quite independent of "my" control. This state of affairs is familiar terrain for anyone who has attempted to practise meditation, where it will soon be discovered how difficult it is to avoid getting lost in all kinds of thoughts and reflections, daydreams and memories. All this takes place in spite of one's earlier determination to focus on a particular meditation object. To remedy this situation, the arising of *vitakka* needs to slowly be brought under more conscious control through gradual taming of the mind in meditation. Hence it comes as an expression of remarkable meditative expertise when a monk can claim that he has such control over his mind that he will only think the thoughts he really wants to think (M. I, 122). To teach others how to

properly direct the thinking activity of the mind therefore deserves to be reckoned a miracle in matters of instruction, *anusāsanipāṭihāriya* (*D. I*, 214).

To stop unwholesome thought from continuing can, according to the *Vitakkasaṅḥāna Sutta*, be undertaken in various ways (*M. I*, 119; see also VITAKKASAṅḤĀNA SUTTA). One way is to give attention to something wholesome instead. In case this does not suffice, one might direct attention to the harmful consequences of allowing unwholesome thoughts to continue. Should this not work, one could try to completely forget about them, or else try to bring about a stilling of the mental formations responsible for them. As a last resort, one may use force of the mind to expel unwholesome thoughts.

A gradual perspective on how to deal with thought is provided in a discourse in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*. This discourse compares dealing with thought to the gradual refining of gold, where at first gross impurities are removed, followed by removing finer impurities (*A. I*, 253). In a similar way, when attempting to purify the mind at first the gross type of thought, related to overt unwholesome conduct, have to be overcome. Once these are removed, any type of thought related to sensuality, ill-will and harming needs to be overcome. With these gone, there still remains the task to leave behind thoughts related to this and that, such as thoughts about one's relatives, home country and reputation etc. Once these are also left behind, there still remain *dharmavitakka*, which might stand for reflections about the teachings.<sup>2</sup> Further development of the mind then leads to one-pointed concentration.

In fact, according to the *Samaṇamañḍikā Sutta*, the complete cessation of unwholesome thoughts and intentions can be achieved by attaining the first *jhāna*. This points to the contribution that the development of *samatha* has to offer in relation to overcoming unwholesome thoughts. A meditation practice explicitly recommended for going beyond thought is mindfulness of breathing (*Ud.* 37).

#### *Vitakka and Jhāna*

The *Dvedhāvitakka Sutta* indicates that even though thoughts related to renunciation, non ill-will and harmlessness are entirely wholesome, yet,

excessive thinking will tire the mind and not lead to concentration. Hence at some point even wholesome thoughts need to be left behind in order to steady the mind and lead it to deeper concentration (*M. I*, 116). However, though deeper stages of concentration will lead beyond thoughts, this does not mean that *vitakka* has no place at all in the context of early Buddhist meditation. In fact, reflective types of meditation are described in the discourses and in later literature, involving various recollections, *anussati*. These can take the Buddha, his teachings or the community as their object, or else one's own virtue or generosity, or heavenly beings (*A. III*, 312).

In the realm of mindfulness meditation proper, thought also appears to have its proper place. This much can be seen from the instructions given in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, which frequently express what is to be contemplated in direct speech, employing the particle *iti*. Thus in the case of contemplating feelings, for example, the instruction is that when experiencing a pleasant or a painful feeling, one should clearly know "I experience a pleasant feeling" or "I experience a painful feeling", '*sukhaṃ vedanaṃ vediyāmi itipi pajānāmi* or '*dukkhaṃ vedanaṃ vediyāmi itipi pajānāmi* (*M. I*, 59). This points to the practice of mental labelling. The subtle level of mental verbalization introduced in this way helps to strengthen clarity of recognition. With more advanced levels of practice, such mental labelling can then be dispensed with.

In the context of the development of *jhāna*, *vitakka* also has an important function and will be left behind only with more advanced levels of practice that set in subsequently to the attainment of the first *jhāna*. The role of *vitakka* in regard to the first *jhāna* has been a matter of much controversy. Hence, before examining this role, a short survey of the nature of the first *jhāna* is required, as a background to the implications of *vitakka* as a *jhāna* factor.

According to the *Upakkilesa Sutta*, before his awakening the Buddha had to make quite an effort in order to be able to attain the first *jhāna* (*M. III*, 157). In the case of his disciples Anuruddha and Mahāmoggallāna, the personal intervention of the Buddha was required for them to be able to attain and stabilize the first *jhāna* (*M. III*, 157 and *S. IV*, 263). For Anuruddha and Mahāmoggallāna, who later on became outstanding among the Buddha's disciples for their concentrative abilities (*A. I*, 23), to have such

difficulties clearly indicates that the first *jhāna* stands for a level of concentration that requires considerable meditative expertise. Elsewhere the discourses indicate that during the first *jhāna* it is impossible to speak (*S. IV. 217*), and the hearing of sounds is an obstruction to its attainment (*A. V, 135*). With the first *jhāna* one has gone beyond Māra's vision (*M. I, 159*), having reached the end of the world of the senses (*A. IV, 430*).

Though these passages present the first *jhāna* as a deeply concentrated state of mental absorption, the mental factors required for its attainment include, according to the standard description, *vitakka* and *vicāra*. These two are only left behind with the attainment of the second *jhāna*.<sup>3</sup> To understand the *jhāna* factor *vitakka* here as referring to conceptual thought conflicts with the descriptions of the first *jhāna* given in the above passages, which make it clear that the first *jhāna* is something far deeper than the type of mental condition in which conceptual thought and reflection take place.

The solution to this conundrum can be found with the help of the *Mahācattārīsaka Sutta*, which in a list of near synonyms for right intention includes "application of the mind", *cetaso abhiniropanā*, alongside *vitakka* (*M. III, 73*). This indicates that the range of meaning of *vitakka* goes beyond conceptual thought as such, covering also the sense of an inclination of the mind. Both nuances of *vitakka* are in fact closely related to each other, since to reflect or think on something requires an inclination of the mind towards the topic or issue at hand.

The interrelation between these two nuances of *vitakka* can also be seen in the realm of speech. Here *vitakka* is, together with *vicāra*, a formation responsible for speaking, *vacīsañkhāra* (*M. I, 301*). In fact when speaking, at times one may verbally express something that has already been fully formulated in the mind, fully "thought" out. Yet, at other times there may just be a general sense of direction about what one is going to say and one still has to search the right words while speaking. This general sense of direction also falls within the range of meaning of *vitakka*, not only the fully formulated thoughts at those times when one has already planned one's speech. This sense of a general direction, in the sense of an application or inclination of the mind, requires the support of *vicāra* in order to be carried through.

Just as in relation to formulating speech *vitakka* and *vicāra* express a sense of mental direction and its sustaining, so too in regard to deepening concentration these two fulfil the same role. In the case of deepening concentration, *vitakka* stands for inclining the mind, an inclining that has to go beyond conceptual thought in order to lead the mind into the attainment of the first *jhāna*. With the second *jhāna*, then, even this last vestige of mental activity through *vitakka* and *vicāra* is left behind, hence the mind reaches true inner silence (*S. II, 273*; cf. also *Th. 650* and *Th. 999*). Such silence is not only free from conceptual thought, but also free from the 'noise' of any other deliberate mental activity.

Thus in the context of *jhāna* attainment it would be preferable to avoid rendering *vitakka* as "thought", instead of which "initial application of the mind" would be a more suitable translation. *Vicāra* could then be translated as "sustained application of the mind". The interrelation between these two is described in the *Visuddhimagga* with a set of similes. These compare *vitakka* and *vicāra* to complementary aspects of particular actions, such as striking a gong and the reverberation of the gong; or a bird that spreads out its wings and then soars up into the sky; or a bee that flies towards a flower and then hovers above it; or holding a dish with one hand and cleaning it with the other; or a potter who turns the wheel with one hand and shapes the pottery with the other hand; or drawing a circle with a pin fixed in the centre and another pin that revolves around it (*Vism. 142*). This imagery further shows the prominent implication of *vitakka* as a setting into motion of an activity, be this the mental activity of thinking and reflecting, or the mental activity of developing concentration through inclining the mind towards a particular object of meditation.

#### *Vitakka* Imagery

The nature of *vitakka* has been illustrated in the early discourses with the help of several similes. One of these compares the arising of *vitakka* to a crow that has been bound to a string and then is tossed up into the air by children (*S. I, 207* and *Sn. 271*; cf. also the explanation at *SA. I, 304*). This imagery brings out how the movement of thought can easily give an illusion of personal freedom. But on closer inspection this turns out to be instead a condition of bondage, comparable to the crow that flies up into the air, only to fall back on the ground due to being bound by the string.

This condition of bondage manifests in particular with thoughts of an unwholesome type, and it is such types of thought with which most similes are concerned. Unwholesome thoughts are comparable to corruptions of gold that need to be removed in order for the gold to become flawless, bright and workable, fit for being fashioned into an ornament by a goldsmith (*A. I*, 253). Or else unwholesome thoughts are like a cloud of dust that should be settled, just as a shower of rain will settle any dust (*It.* 83). The images of dust and impurities bring out the obstructive nature of unwholesome thoughts and the need to overcome them in order to access the true potential of the mind.

According to the *Vitakkasaṅṭhāna Sutta*, unwholesome thoughts are like the carcass of a dead snake or dog, or even of a human being, that is put around the neck of a young man or woman who is fond of ornaments (*M. I*, 119). This imagery brings out in particular the objectionable nature of unwholesome thoughts. The same is also inherent in another simile that compares unwholesome thoughts to flies that are attracted by rotting meat (*A. I*, 280). The rotting meat in this simile stands for greed and ill-will. These similes emphasize the degrading and even disgusting nature of such thoughts, and the degree to which they can defile the mind.

The *Vitakkasaṅṭhāna Sutta* also compares unwholesome thoughts to a gross peg, which a carpenter removes with the help of a finer peg (*M. I*, 119). The employment of the finer peg here stands for giving attention to something wholesome in order to overcome unwholesome thoughts. To successfully remove unwholesome thoughts then compares to the ability of a king's elephant to successfully overcome an enemy in battle (*A. II*, 117). The need to restrain unwholesome thought is similar to a cowherd who has to beat his cows in order to prevent them from straying into the ripe crops (*M. I*, 115). These images draw out the importance of confronting unwholesome thought. This importance is related not only to mental culture as such, but also to the fact that thought eventually leads to action. This relationship is brought out in yet another simile, according to which *vitakka* is like smoke at night, in the sense of representing the planning activity of the mind, whereas the implementation of these plans compares to fire during the day (*M. I*, 144).

These various illustrations of the nature of *vitakka* highlight in particular the problem of unwholesome thoughts and the need to overcome them. The same is also the theme of a couplet of verses in the *Dhammapada*, which contrast those who are in bondage, due to being unable to control thought, to those who master thought and thereby go beyond bondage.

*Vitakkapamathitassa jantuno,  
tibbarāgassa subhānupassino,  
bhiyyo taṇhāpavaḍḍhati.*

*esa kho daḷhaṃ karoti bandhanaṃ.*

For a person overwhelmed by thought,

Who, strongly impassioned, looks [at things] as beautiful,

Craving grows ever more,

He, indeed, makes strong [his own state of] bondage  
(*Dhp.* 349).

*Vitakkāvasame ca yo rato,  
asubhaṃ bhāvayati sadā sato,  
esa kho vyantikāhiti,*

*esa checchati Mārabandhanaṃ.*

Who delights in calming thought,

Ever mindful develops [perception] of the absence of beauty,

He will remove [craving],

He will cut Māra's bondage (*Dhp.* 350).

Anālayo

## References

- 1 For a more detailed treatment of the *takkikas* cf. Jayatilleke: *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*, Delhi 1980: 263ff.
- 2 Nāṇaponika & Bodhi: *Numerical Discourses of the Buddha*, Delhi 1999: 289 note 70, offered as an alternative to the commentarial explanation according to which *dhammavitakka* stands for the ten corruptions of insight (*AA. II*, 362).
- 3 On the intermediate stage when *vitakka* has already been left behind but *vicāra* is still present see UPAKKILESA SUTTA.

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