

Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Samma-Sambuddhassa!

A BUDDHIST APPROACH TO THE MASTERY OVER THE MIND THROUGH SKILFUL MENTAL ATTENTION¹

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The practice of skilful (positive) mental attention allows the mind to remain pure throughout the day. It is when skilful mental attention is lacking that negative mental qualities take root in the mind causing the mind to fester like an open wound, causing one to act in a variety of unskilful (negative) ways through words and deeds. This lack of skilful mental attention is what the vast majority of beings engage in regularly by default.

The Lord Buddha described the mind as inherently pure but liable to impurity from incoming external negative qualities.² Here ‘external negative qualities’ refers to mental impurities that arise in the mind in response to unskilful attention and thinking. All negative mental qualities can be broadly classified under the three *root* negative qualities of i. greed (*lobha*) and all such related qualities, ii. anger (*dosa*) and all such related qualities iii. and delusion (*moha*) and all such related qualities.³ It is when one engages in, gives into, subscribes to and becomes a slave of such negative mental qualities that one is said to be engaging in unskilful mental attention. This usually leads to negative actions and consequences for oneself and/or others, so it is very important to turn this unskilful mental attention around into skilful mental attention.

There are two aspects to skilful mental attention; skilful awareness (*samma-sati*) and skilful effort (*samma-vayamo*).⁴ Skilful awareness (*samma-sati*) acts as the watchman over negative mental qualities. Whenever negative qualities arise, it's function is to correctly detect and identify them and to raise the alarm. For the bulk of weak negative mental qualities that arise, skilful awareness (*samma-sati*) alone is adequate for their subjugation; just becoming and being aware of them causes them to subside.⁴ This is akin to a cat (negative mental quality) approaching the watchman (skilful awareness - *samma-sati*) of a house (the mind), seeing the watchman and running away.

Skilful awareness (*samma-sati*) is required at all times of the day, much like keeping watchmen on duty to watch over a house (the mind) at all times of the day. The Lord Buddha has exhaustively detailed skilful awareness (*samma-sati*) in the *Maha-Satipatthana sutta*, where it is further divided into four aspects and commonly referred to as the ‘four foundations of mindfulness/awareness,’ viz. i. awareness of the body (*kayanupassana*), ii. awareness of feelings (*vedananupassana*), iii. awareness of the mind (*cittanupassana*) and iv. awareness of phenomena (*dhammanupassana*). All four areas are to equally and constantly developed^{4,5} in order to gain a deeper awareness and understanding of the inner functioning of the mind and body. This is akin to placing four watchmen (four foundations of mindfulness/awareness) on all four sides of a house (the mind) for complete visibility of approaching threats (negative mental qualities).

However the approach of skilful awareness (*samma-sati*) alone will not suffice for very strong negative mental qualities that threaten to overpower the mind. In such instances skilful effort (*samma-vayamo*) is also required.⁴ Skilful effort (*samma-vayamo*) involves exerting effort i. to abandon the negative qualities already present within the mind; ii. to prevent further negative qualities from arising and becoming established within the mind; iii. to develop and give rise to further positive qualities not yet present within the mind iv. and to maintain and further establish the positive qualities already present within the mind. Skilful effort (*samma-vayamo*) requires one to

employ whatever skilful means necessary to quell the strong negative mental forces that have arisen within the mind. Here skilful effort ([*samma-vayamo*](#)) acts like the armed guards that are called in by the watchmen (skilful awareness - [*samma-sati*](#)) when the threat is too strong. This is akin to a lion (negative mental quality) approaching the watchmen (skilful awareness - [*samma-sati*](#)) of a house (the mind), the watchmen seeing and understanding that the lion is beyond their capacity and calling on armed guards (skilful effort - [*samma-vayamo*](#)) who then subdue it.

The Lord Buddha has outlined many methods and techniques for subduing negative mental qualities.⁶ One of the most effective methods is to develop the opposite positive counter quality to the arisen negative mental quality. For example when anger arises kindness ([*metta*](#)) should be developed; compassion ([*karuna*](#)) should be developed for cruelty; sympathetic joy ([*mudita*](#)) for jealousy; generosity ([*caga*](#)) for stinginess; foulness contemplations ([*asubha*](#)) for lust; concentration of the mind through means such as the awareness of breath ([*anapanasati*](#)) for restlessness and fear; energy through effort such as getting up and walking for sloth, torpor and sleepiness and wise/skilful reflection ([*yoniso manasikara*](#)) for doubt⁷ and so on.

Constant development and maintenance of skilful mental attention is not an easy task and will require much effort and persistence. However once one is established in this method of gaining mastery over the mind, one will no longer need to fear becoming a victim of negative mental qualities that arise within the mind. One will gain mastery over them and will therefore be able to enjoy the happiness to be gained from having a pure mind. Furthermore one will be fulfilling and bringing to fruition two important factors of the [Noble Eightfold Path](#), i.e. skilful awareness ([*samma-sati*](#)) and skilful effort ([*samma-vayamo*](#)), along with the other factors of the [Path](#).

May you gain mastery over the mind by constantly developing and strengthening skilful mental attention and [enter the stream](#) in this very life!

WHAT CAN AND CANNOT BE CONTROLLED

You cannot control *what* will come up,
when it will come up,
 and *how* it will make you feel;
 these things are beyond your control.⁴

But you *can* control whatever comes up;
 when it is coming up,
 and after it has come up;
 meaning how you respond to them,
 skilfully or unskilfully,
is within your means.

Notes

1. The latest version of this article can be found in **HTML** format here <http://tinyurl.com/mb44xw> and here <http://sites.google.com/site/dhammadgroupweb/pubs/mentatt> or in **PDF** format here <http://tinyurl.com/mhgh9o> and here <http://sites.google.com/site/dhammadgroupweb/pubs/mentatt/print.pdf> (case sensitive)

2. Refer to [Anguttara Nikaya](#) 1.49-52, PTS: A i 10 (I,v,9-10; I,vi,1-2) [Pabhassara Sutta](#): Luminous here <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/an/an01/an01.049.than.html> and [Anguttara Nikaya](#), 1. Ekakanipata, V. Panihita-acchavaggo, [If controlled pure](#) here <http://metta.lk/tipitaka/2Sutta-Pitaka/4Anguttara-Nikaya/Anguttara1/1-ekaniyata/005-Sukavaggo-e.html> (case

sensitive)

3. Greed (*lobha*) including qualities such as desire, craving, jealousy, lust, passion, longing, affection, wanting, pining, hankering, wishing, etc.; ii. anger (*dosa*) including qualities such as aversion, irritation, ill-will, bitterness, resentment, jealousy, etc. iii. and delusion (*moha*) including qualities such as confusion, stupidity, foolishness, mental blindness, ignorance, etc. All mental defilements ultimately arise from ignorance (*avijja*). See <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn45/sn45.001.than.html>

4. Many thanks to [Ajahn Brahm](#) and [Ven. Bodhicitta](#) for explaining the distinct functions that skilful awareness (*samma-sati*) and skilful effort (*samma-vayamo*) play in subduing mental negativities along with several other points.

5. To develop and maintain skilful awareness (*samma-sati*) requires and is also a part of skilful effort (*samma-vayamo*).

6. Refer to *Related Discourses (Suttas) and Other Resources* below.

7. Skilful mental reflection (*yoniso manasikara*) wherein one wisely reflects on reality of all things (i. *anicca* – impermanence; ii. *dukkha* – suffering/stress/unsatisfactoriness and iii. *anatta* – no real self/nothing is mine or really part of me) to primarily subdue the mental hindrance of doubt. When one constantly reflects on these three realities of *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anatta*; delusion (*moha*) which is at the root of *all* unskilful/negative actions subsides thereby purifying the mind. One needs to engage in skilful mental reflection (*yoniso manasikara*) to firstly *want* to develop skilful awareness (*samma-sati*) and skilful effort (*samma-vayamo*). Skilful awareness (*samma-sati*) also brings the subject into focus for skilful mental reflection (*yoniso manasikara*) and the subsequent subjugation of mental defilements through skilful effort (*samma-vayamo*) (after skilful mental reflection - *yoniso manasikara*).

Related Discourses (suttas) and Other Resources

1. *Anguttara Nikaya*, I. Ekakanipata, II. Navaraoapahana Vagga, *Expelling obstacles* see <http://metta.lk/tipitaka/2Sutta-Pitaka/4Anguttara-Nikaya/Anguttara1/1-ekaniyata/002-Nivaranappahanavaggo-e.html> (case sensitive)

2. *Majjhima Nikaya* 20, PTS: M i 118, *Vitakkasanthana Sutta: The Relaxation of Thoughts* see <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.020.than.html>

3. *Anguttara Nikaya* 7.60, PTS: A iv 94, *Kodhana Sutta: An Angry Person* see <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/an/an07/an07.060.than.html>

4. *Digha Nikaya* 22, PTS: D ii 290, *Maha-satipatthana Sutta: The Great Frames of Reference* see <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/dn/dn.22.0.than.html>

5. *Anguttara Nikaya* 1.49-52, PTS: A i 10 (I,v,9-10; I,vi,1-2) *Pabhassara Sutta: Luminous* see <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/an/an01/an01.049.than.html>

6. *Anguttara Nikaya*, I. Ekakanipata, V. Panihita-acchavaggo, *If controlled pure* see <http://metta.lk/tipitaka/2Sutta-Pitaka/4Anguttara-Nikaya/Anguttara1/1-ekaniyata/005-Sukavaggo-e.html> (case sensitive)

7. *Satipatthana* (frames of reference/foundations of mindfulness) see <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/index-subject.html#satipatthana>

8. *Samyutta Nikaya* 45.1, PTS: S v 1; CDB ii 1523, *Avijja Sutta: Ignorance* see <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn45/sn45.001.than.html>

Related Articles

1. *A Buddhist Approach to the Awareness of In-and-Out Breath Meditation - Anapanasati* - A Buddhist approach to the awareness of breath meditation (*anapanasati*), see <http://www.vihara.org.au/go?to=anapanasati>

2. *A Buddhist Approach to Disenchantment* - A Buddhist approach to becoming disenchanted with all that gives rise to stress, see <http://www.vihara.org.au/go?to=disench>

3. *A Buddhist Approach to Disillusionment* - A Buddhist approach to seeing past the trickery and into reality, see <http://www.vihara.org.au/go?to=disill>

4. *A Buddhist Approach to Mental Health* - A Buddhist perspective and approach to mental health, see <http://www.vihara.org.au/go?to=mentalhealth>

5. [A Buddhist Approach to Revulsion - Asubha](http://www.vihara.org.au/go?to=revul) - A Buddhist approach to bodily revulsion (*asubha*), see <http://www.vihara.org.au/go?to=revul>
6. [A Buddhist Approach to the Contemplation on Body Parts - Asubha](http://www.vihara.org.au/go?to=asubhaparts) - A Buddhist approach to bodily revulsion (*asubha*) through the detailed contemplation of the body parts, see <http://www.vihara.org.au/go?to=asubhaparts>
7. [A Buddhist Approach to the Meaning of Life](http://www.vihara.org.au/go?to=life) - A Buddhist approach to the meaning of life, see <http://www.vihara.org.au/go?to=life>
8. [An Introduction to Buddhist Meditation](http://www.vihara.org.au/go?to=intromed) - Basic instructions for doing the meditations of loving kindness (*metta*), awareness of breath (*anapanasati*) and foulness of the body (*asubha*), see <http://www.vihara.org.au/go?to=intromed>
9. [Attachment](http://www.vihara.org.au/go?to=attachment) - An analysis of how attachment leads to unsatisfactoriness, see <http://www.vihara.org.au/go?to=attachment>
10. [Buddhist Positive Thinking](http://www.vihara.org.au/go?to=posthink) - Positive thinking from a Buddhist perspective, see <http://www.vihara.org.au/go?to=posthink>
11. [Consequences](http://www.vihara.org.au/go?to=conseq) - About being responsible for our actions (*kamma*) and their consequences (*vipaka*), see <http://www.vihara.org.au/go?to=conseq>
12. [Equanimity](http://www.vihara.org.au/go?to=equanimity) - Dealing with the eight characteristics of life, see <http://www.vihara.org.au/go?to=equanimity>
13. [Fault Finding & Resentment](http://www.vihara.org.au/go?to=faultfind) - Dealing with fault finding and resentment, see <http://www.vihara.org.au/go?to=faultfind>
14. [Five Precepts](http://www.vihara.org.au/go?to=pansil) - Developing virtue through the five precepts, see <http://www.vihara.org.au/go?to=pansil>
15. [Four Noble Truths](http://www.vihara.org.au/go?to=fourtruths) - The essence of Buddhism, see <http://www.vihara.org.au/go?to=fourtruths>
16. [Mental Purity](http://www.vihara.org.au/go?to=vitakkasantana) - Five ways prescribed by the Buddha for subduing mental defilements, see <http://www.vihara.org.au/go?to=vitakkasantana>
17. [Metta Meditation](http://www.vihara.org.au/go?to=mettamed) - Easy to follow instructions for doing the meditation on loving-kindness, see <http://www.vihara.org.au/go?to=mettamed>
18. [Noble Eightfold Path](http://www.vihara.org.au/go?to=noblepath) - The path for ending unsatisfactoriness, stress and suffering, see <http://www.vihara.org.au/go?to=noblepath>
19. [Work Stress](http://www.vihara.org.au/go?to=workstress) - An analysis of stress in the work-place, see <http://www.vihara.org.au/go?to=workstress>

Dhamma (Buddhist) Portal Websites

1. [AccessToInsight.org](http://www.accesstoinsight.org) see <http://www.accesstoinsight.org>
2. [What-Buddha-Said.net](http://what-buddha-said.net) see <http://what-buddha-said.net>
3. [Metta.lk](http://www.metta.lk) see <http://www.metta.lk>
4. [What-Buddha-Taught.net](http://what-buddha-taught.net) see <http://what-buddha-taught.net>
5. [Buddhanet.net](http://www.buddhanet.net) see <http://www.buddhanet.net>
6. [Vihara.org.au](http://www.vihara.org.au) see <http://www.vihara.org.au>
7. [DhammaGroup.tk](http://www.dhammagroup.tk) see <http://www.dhammagroup.tk>



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