

## Wise Attention

By Venerable Xin-xing

Enlightenment is attained by means of the Noble Eightfold Path. The Buddha says there are four factors that can help us reach the Noble Eightfold Path: (i) associating with superior persons; (ii) hearing the true Dhamma; (iii) wise attention; and (iv) practice in accordance with the Dhamma. Among these four factors, *wise attention* plays a very important role. Wise attention helps us to overcome the five hindrances and develop the seven factors of enlightenment. It is by wise attention that one transcends the level of an ordinary person and reaches the level of a noble one, an enlightened person.

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But what exactly is meant by wise attention? The Pali expression translated as wise attention is *yoniso manasikara*. *Yoniso manasikara* applies the method of dependent origination in unique ways to the understanding of human existence. It is very difficult to capture this nuance in any English translation of the expression. In order to understand what *yoniso manasikara* means, let us first see how the Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary treats the term.

According to the PTS Dictionary, *yonis* means 'origin', and *yoniso*, an ablative form of this word, means 'down to its origin or foundation'. *Manasikara* means 'attention, pondering, fixed thought'. Thus *yoniso manasikara* means "fixing one's attention with a purpose or thoroughly." It is proper attention with thorough method in one's thought.

### Wise Attention in Removing the "Taints"

Now I would like to explain the Buddha's teaching on wise attention as given in the *Sabbasava Sutta*, "The Discourse on All the Taints" (MN 2). The theme of "The Discourse on All the Taints" is the application of wise attention to the task of eradicating the "taints" (*asava*), the fundamental defilements that keep us bound to *samsara*, the round of birth and death. It is by unwise attention that the unarisen taints arise and arisen taints increase, and thus unwise attention keeps us in bondage to *samsara*. On the other hand, it is by wise attention that unarisen taints do not arise and arisen taints are destroyed.

In the sutta, the Buddha explains how an "untaught ordinary person" attends unwisely and a well-taught noble disciple attends wisely. The untaught ordinary person does not know what is fit for attention and what is unfit for attention. Thus he attends unwisely to the past, present, and future, engages in speculations about his identity in the three periods of time, and becomes entangled in views concerning a truly existent self. These speculative views, the Buddha says, are called "the fetter of views." And "fettered by the fetter of views, the untaught ordinary person is not freed from birth, aging, and death; he is not freed from suffering, I say."

In contrast to the deluded ordinary person, the well-taught noble disciple understands what things are fit for attention and what things are unfit for attention. He attends wisely to the things that should be attended to,

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#### IMPORTANT:

Monastery Closed to Public on Saturday, December 10th  
Meditation Retreat Scheduled – All Must Register to Attend

## Wise Attention *(continued from page 1)*

and these things turn out to be the Four Noble Truths: “He wisely attends: ‘This is suffering’; ‘This is the origin of suffering’; ‘This is the cessation of suffering’; ‘This is the way leading to the cessation of suffering.’”

**Wise attention means that when we investigate suffering, we trace suffering down to its cause, origin, or foundation; we do so thoroughly, orderly, wisely, properly, and judiciously.**

When he attends wisely in this way, he abandons the first three “fetters”: the view of a truly existent self, doubt about the Buddha and his teaching, and adherence to useless rules and observances.

From the above, we can see that an untaught ordinary person attends to human existence “unwisely” by mere philosophical speculation, which leads him into an endless labyrinth of doubt. A well-taught noble disciple, in contrast, attends to human existence wisely, by the scheme of the Four Noble Truths, and this leads to liberating wisdom.

In what sense is philosophical speculation an approach to human existence characterized by unwise attention? And in what sense does the scheme of the Four Noble Truths give us an approach to human existence through wise attention? The commentary on the *Sabbasava Sutta* defines wise attention as “attention that is the right means (*upaya*), on the right track (*patha*).” Unwise attention is “attention that is the wrong means, on the wrong track (*uppatha*).” Unfortunately, the commentator does not explain in what sense wise attention is “the right means.” It is just this question that I would now like to explore.

### Tracing Suffering Down to its Origin

As we saw above, the word *yoniso* is an ablative, a case that implies causation. In the example of the Four Noble Truths, wise attention means that when we investigate suffering, we trace suffering down to its cause, origin, or foundation; we do so thoroughly, orderly, wisely, properly, and judiciously. To take another example: In the *Nidana-samyutta* (SN. 12.10), the Buddha explains how he became enlightened by investigating the cause of aging-and-death. In this narrative he assigns a key role to wise attention. He says:

Bhikkhus, before my enlightenment, while I was still a bodhisatta, not yet fully enlightened, it occurred to me: “Alas, this world has fallen into trouble, in that it is born, ages, and dies, it passes away and is reborn, yet it does not understand the escape from this suffering led by aging-and-death. When will an escape be discerned from this suffering led by aging-and-death?” Then, bhikkhus, it occurred to me: “When what exists does aging-and-death come to be? By what is aging-and-death conditioned?” Then, bhikkhus, through wise attention, there took place in me a breakthrough by wisdom: “When there is birth, aging-and-death comes to be; aging-and-death has birth as its condition.”

In the same way, the Buddha traced back the chain of causation by way of origin as far as ignorance, and then traced forwards the chain of causation from the cessation of ignorance to the cessation of old age and death, the cessation of the entire mass of suffering. In each case, wise attention led to the breakthrough by wisdom.

From the above, we can see that by *yoniso manasikara*, one investigates the arisen phenomena and finds the condition for that very arisen phenomenon; one sees how the given phenomenon originates and ceases in dependence on its condition. Therefore, *yoniso manasikara* is not philosophical speculation but reflection built on observation seeking to understand how things originate through conditions, that is, it is investigation of dependent origination.

Dependent origination is a lawful element of nature that always exists, that always operates. The task of a Buddha is to discover this lawfulness and proclaim it to humanity. Thus the Buddha says: “What is dependent origination? With birth as condition, aging-and-death comes to be: whether there is an arising of Tathagatas or no arising of Tathagatas, that element still persists, the stableness of the Dhamma, the fixed course of the

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Dhamma, specific conditionality. A Tathagata awakens to it and penetrates it, and then proclaims, declares, and teaches it: "With birth as condition, aging-and-death comes to be." (SN 12:20).

Therefore, the method implied in the investigation of the dependent origination is to trace arisen phenomena down to their origin. This is called *yoniso manasikara*.

### A Discourse on Right View

The Venerable Sariputta became enlightened upon hearing a verse on dependent origination spoken by the Venerable Assaji. Based on his experience of enlightenment, he taught the *Sammaditthi Sutta*, the Discourse on Right View (MN 9), which explains sixteen methods by which a noble disciple "enters the stream," that is, becomes enlightened. Though the contents of these methods vary, they all conform to the following pattern:

1. a certain phenomenon has arisen;
2. it arises through a cause, its origin;
3. it ceases when its cause ceases;
4. there is a way leading to its cessation.

The above-mentioned pattern is evidence that wise attention investigates dependent origination. It is for this reason that the Venerable Sariputta once said, quoting a famous verse of the Buddha: "One who sees dependent origination sees the Dhamma, and one who sees the Dhamma sees dependent origination" (MN 28.28). ☸

## One-Day Meditation Retreat on Saturday, December 10th

The retreat will begin at 8:30 am and end at 5:30 pm. Participants must attend the entire retreat from start to finish. The main subject of practice will be mindfulness of breathing.

There will be periods of sitting meditation alternating with walking meditation throughout the day.

The retreat will be suitable for beginning meditators as well as more advanced students. There will be instructions, a short talk, and a period for questions relating to the practice. It will end with the regular afternoon liturgy from 4:30 to 5:00 pm followed by a period of loving-kindness meditation from 5:00 to 5:30 pm.

Anyone is welcome to sleep over at the monastery on

Friday evening but must follow the monastery rules and its schedule of rising at 3:30 am for morning liturgy.

Application deadline is November 26th. The application, with more information about the retreat, is at: [www.bodhimonastery.net](http://www.bodhimonastery.net) under the heading "Announcements." We prefer on-line applications, but the form is also available on the site as a PDF to print out and mail or fax in. You may also request that a paper application be sent to you by either emailing [retreat@bodhimonastery.net](mailto:retreat@bodhimonastery.net) or writing to the monastery. Applications are available at the front desk of the monastery as well.

There is no fee for attending the retreat but donations are welcome.

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*"I do not perceive even one other thing, O monks, that when developed  
and cultivated entails such great happiness as the mind.  
The mind when developed and cultivated entails great happiness"*

AN 1: iii, 10; 15-16

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## NEWS BRIEFS

### Ven. Jen-chun Visits Taiwan, China, and California

Shifu is expected to return with Ven. Guo-ching on November 16th. They left on October 15th to participate in the opening of Dharma Drum Mountain in Taiwan on Oct. 22nd. From there they are to go to mainland China where Shifu is to give lectures in Hong Kong, Shenzhen, and Shanghai. They will stop over in California on their return trip to attend another opening ceremony at Fa-yin Temple.

### Bhante's Saturday Dharma Talks on the Sutta Nipata Continue

The *Sutta-Nipata* contains some of the oldest discourses in the Pali Canon. It is a rich source of texts offering guidance to both lay Buddhists and monastics. These lectures are on alternate Saturday afternoons at 12:40 pm. Ven. Xin-xing lectures on the other Saturdays.

### Majjhima Nikaya Class Winter Breaks Tentatively Scheduled

Thanksgiving Break: Nov. 22, 05

Holiday Break: Dec. 20, 05 through Jan. 3, 06, resuming on Jan. 10th.\*

Winter Break: Feb. 14, 06 through Mar. 14, 06, resuming on Mar. 21st.\*

\*Subject to modification.

### Ven. Guang-jing Lectures on the Thought of Master Yin-shun

During Master Jen-chun's absence, Ven. Guang-jing, a visiting monk from Fu-yen Institute of Buddhist Studies in Taiwan, has been giving a series of lectures on the thought of Master Yin-shun. These lectures, in Chinese, have been given on Saturdays from 1:45- 2:45 pm. We have greatly appreciated his teaching during his stay at the monastery.

### Bodhi Youth Program Continues

This class for kids ages 9 - 13 years old is taught by William Bertolotti and will be held on Saturday mornings, November 5th and December 3rd, from 9:50-11:00 am. For more information contact William at 516 314 0306 or by email, [williambertolotti@yahoo.com](mailto:williambertolotti@yahoo.com).

### Majjhima Nikaya Sutta Study Lectures Now Up to Date on Site

We have recently acquired a larger server for our website and are now able to post more mp3 audio files on our site. We have updated the Majjhima Nikaya lectures on the site to include the most current lectures and plan on posting new lectures on a regular basis. The file names are different from those originally posted but the lectures are the same, with slightly improved sound quality.

## NOVEMBER/DECEMBER DHARMA SCHEDULE

### SATURDAYS:

9:50 - 10:40 am	Study Groups in English and Chinese
10:50 - 11:10 pm	Devotional Service
11:15 - 12:15 pm	Lunch and cleanup
12:40 - 1:30 pm	Dharma Talk (English) by Ven. Bodhi, Ven. Xin-xing, or guest lecturer
1:45 - 2:30 pm	Dharma Talk (Chinese) by Ven. Jen-chun
2:45 - 4:45 pm	Pali class

### SUNDAYS:

9:30 - 10:45 am	Meditation Group guided by resident monks
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### FIRST SUNDAY OF EACH MONTH:

9:00 - 9:30 am	Beginners instruction in meditation
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### TUESDAYS:\*

7:00 - 8:15 pm	Sutta Study Class with Ven. Bodhi
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\*Class cancelled Nov. 22nd

### DAILY:

4:30 - 5:00 pm	Chanting Liturgy
5:05 - 6:00 pm	Sitting meditation