

Not Too Tight and Not Too Loose, Properly Tuning the Lute: Avoiding the Extremes of Indulgence in Sense Pleasure and Self Mortification in the Vinaya

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This paper is an exploration of how the image of the proper tuning of the lute strings (not too loose and not too tight), which was used by the Buddha in the Vinaya-Piṭaka can be applied to understanding middle way with respect to meditation and to how the Vinaya rules were developed.

INTRODUCTION:

The story of Soṇa Koḷivisa in the Mahāvagga of The Book of the Discipline ¹ illustrates two aspects of the Buddha's teaching. Both are connected with the Buddha's emphasis on the Middle Way. One aspect is about meditation, and the proper application of energy for practice. With respect to Ven. Soṇa's meditation, the Buddha recommended a middle way for practice, not too tight and not too loose. The other part of Ven. Soṇa's story is about footwear for monks, namely sandals, for Ven. Soṇa was the first monk to be allowed sandals by the Buddha, and the Mahāvagga tells of the numerous revisions to the rules around footwear that were to follow. As the story and the rules develop, we can see the constant effort of the Vinaya to find a middle path between the extremes of sensual pleasure on the one side, and overly severe asceticism on the other. Using the theme of "tuning the strings of the lute" we can see how the Vinaya is constantly seeking a middle way that is not too tight and not too loose. As we examine many of the stories of how and why the rules were formulated, we can see how the rules are alternatively tightened and loosened to adapt them to changing circumstances. This makes the tuning of the lute strings a very appropriate simile with regard to the formulation and fine tuning of the Vinaya rules.

This paper will examine selected sections of the Vinaya, using the theme of tuning of the lute to bring understanding to how the rules changed with changing conditions, always aiming for a middle way appropriate for harmonious practice and lifestyle for Saṅgha members. After looking at examples of this lute tuning image in the formulating of the Vinaya rules, the paper will briefly return to an exploration of the Buddha's original purpose in using the image of the properly tuned lute, i.e. what is meditation that is not too loose and not too tight?

THE STORY OF SOṆA KOḶIVISA:

In chapter 5, the Mahāvagga tells us Soṇa Koḷivisa was the son of a wealthy family who pampered him during his upbringing.² His life was so easy that he grew fine hair called “down” on the bottoms of his feet. Young birds grow soft down on their bodies before they get their feathers, and it was this kind of soft down that was growing on the bottoms of Soṇa’s feet. This was so unusual that the King Seniya Bimbisāra of Magadha asked to see Soṇa out of curiosity. Soṇa’s parents told Soṇa to sit cross legged in front of the king, not to point his feet directly at the king, which would have been rude. They then sent Soṇa off to the palace in a palanquin. King Bimbisāra saw Soṇa’s feet, and his curiosity was satisfied.

Sometime later, the Buddha was living in the area of Soṇa’s home. Soṇa heard his teaching and was very impressed, so much so that he went forth (*pabbajati*) from his home and became a Buddhist monk. Despite his soft upbringing, Ven. Soṇa refrained from pampering himself. In fact he bore down with extreme energy. He did so much walking meditation that his soft feet bled profusely, covering the place where he walked with blood.

Despite his efforts, he failed to sense progress. He looked at the other monks who were attaining stages along the path, but he felt no such attainment. Feeling discouraged he decided to give up his robe and go back to his family.

The Buddha, who knew Ven. Soṇa’s thoughts, came to the place where Ven. Soṇa was living. He saw blood on the path and asked the other monks about it. They reported the blood was from Ven. Soṇa’s feet, due to intense walking meditation. The Buddha called to Ven. Soṇa and asked him about his life as a layman. Ven. Soṇa had been a lute player, so the Buddha asked him about properly tuning the lute. Ven. Soṇa replied the strings should be not too tight and not too slack. Then they could make a harmonious and beautiful sound. The Buddha pointed out that one’s energy in successful meditation is just so, it should not be too little, which leads to slackness and sloth, and it should not be too much, which leads to restlessness. Rather, one should seek balance in ones practice, avoiding the extremes.

The Mahāvagga reports the Buddha as saying, “Even so, Soṇa, does too much output of energy conduce to restlessness, does too feeble energy conduce to slothfulness. Therefore, do you Soṇa determine upon evenness in energy and pierce the evenness of the faculties and reflect upon it.”³ Having understood the point of the Buddha’s teaching and

having determined upon “evenness of energy”, Ven. Soṇa returned to his meditations and achieved arahanthood.

Ven. Soṇa came to the Buddha to report on his attainment, and in a striking passage likening his mind free from dukkha to a firm mountain slope he tells of his deliverance from dukkha,

It is as if, Blessed One, there were a rocky mountain slope without a cleft, without a hollow, of one mass, and as if wild wind and rain should come very strongly from the eastern quarter-it would neither tremble nor quake, not shake violently; and as if the wild wind and rain should come from the western quarter...from the northern quarter, from the southern quarter-it would neither tremble nor quake nor shake violently. Even so, Blessed One, if shapes cognizable by the eye come very strongly into the field of vision of a monk whose mind is wholly freed, if sounds cognizable by the ear, if scents cognizable by the nose, if touches cognizable by the body, if tastes cognizable by the tongue, if mental objects cognizable by the mind come very strongly into the field of thought of a monk whose mind is wholly freed, they do not obsess his mind, for his mind comes to be undefiled, firm, won to composure, and he notes its passing hence.⁴

At the end of this paper, after exploring the application of the lute tuning simile to the Vinaya rules, we will briefly return to the subject of meditation, and how the simile applies to “evenness of energy” in meditation.

RULES ABOUT SANDALS:⁵

Pleased with his disciple, and recognizing that the Ven. Soṇa had been raised in luxury, the Buddha allowed him to wear sandals of one lining to protect his tender feet. Thus, the Buddha eschewed needless pain and allowed Ven. Soṇa some small comfort. This shows the turning away from harsh asceticism. Hence, it is a “loosening of the lute string of the Vinaya rules”.

However, Ven. Soṇa pointed out that since only he was allowed sandals, he would be liable to criticism from laypeople who would say that since he had been raised in luxury, he even yet could not give up a luxury like sandals. The Buddha then allowed sandals of a single lining to all monks. A sandal with a single lining is a rather thin sandal.

Then enters into the account the notorious monks of the group of six monks (*chabbaggiyā bhikkhū*). The group of six monks figures in the Vinaya repeatedly, as a literary device to show the extreme of indulgence in sensual pleasures. That such a group really existed, at least in the way in which they figure into the narrative, is farfetched. As we will see, the group of six monks, who act as troublemakers in the narratives, provide a necessary counterpoint to allow the compilers of the Vinaya to account for every possible way the rules might be stretched (or at least many, if not all, of the possibilities). This allows the legalistic Indian mind to explore the possible violations of the rules and then to legislate against such violations in a systematic and thorough way.

There is a corresponding group of six nuns, rivaling their male counterparts in their ability to do something similar regarding forbidden action without actually breaking the rules. The Buddha, as the rule maker, always seems a step behind them in the narrative, until he finally tightens the rules to sufficiently keep them in line, at least for the time being. In his book Buddhist Nuns (Wijayaratna, 2010) Mohan Wijayaratna points out their useful function in the formulation of the Vinaya, although he does not question their authenticity as real people. He writes, “These nuns also rendered an indirect service to the Community of Nuns by creating disorder. Because of such circumstances, it was necessary to establish new rules or to bring special amendments to the rules already enacted.”⁶

To return to the Mahāvagga narrative, now that sandals have been allowed by the Buddha, the groups of six monks try all the possibilities, which are disallowed by the Buddha, one by one. First, they wear lovely green sandals which are disallowed once the Buddha hears of it. Undeterred, they try yellow, then red, crimson, black, orange and multi-colored sandals, each of which is disallowed in turn. Then they try sandals with straps, knee boots, and sandals filled with cotton, none of which the Buddha allows. Then they ornament their sandals with goat horns, scorpion tails, peacock feathers, lion skin, tiger skin, leopard skin and skin of antelope. This is a partial list of their ingenious inventions. Of course, none of this is allowed.

Were this a narrative of actual events, the Buddha would have quickly caught on to the strategy of the group of six monks and would have called them into his presence for correction, as he did with the monk Ven. Sāti, who was holding erroneous views concerning consciousness and rebirth, and the monk Ven. Ariṭṭha, who was holding the wrong view that it was not an error to practice actions forbidden to monks by the Buddha.⁷ But of course, the Buddha never disciplines the group of six

monks, as their existence in the narrative is purely for the purpose of illuminating the various possibilities of the extreme of indulgence in sense pleasures.

Returning to the story (Vin. p.247), once the extreme of indulgence in lovely sandals has been avoided, the practicality of the Vinaya and the need for avoidance of painful extremes once again comes forward. The rules are now too tight and need loosening. The story continues that the Buddha is on alms round and his monk attendant is limping with a split foot. Some compassionate lay followers try to donate their sandals to him, which have multiple linings. But he refuses the sandals as they have too many linings and do not come within the Vinaya rule of sandals with only a single lining. Out of compassion for the painfully limping monk, the Buddha allows him these donated sandals, and says multi-lined sandals may be worn if they are “cast off”, that is used by a previous owner. Thus monks can wear the donated sandals and avoid injuring his painful foot.

The Buddha then makes some etiquette rules concerning the sandals. If the Buddha or the senior monks are walking without sandals during walking meditation time, then the junior monks should not wear their sandals at that time, out of respect. And sandals should not be worn inside the monastery.

But this rule proves to be, like the overly wound lute string, too tight. A monk with painful corns on his feet has to be carried to the toilet by his fellow monks. A corn on the foot is an abnormal thickening of the skin that can intertwine with nerves and make walking very painful. So now the rules prove to be too tight, and Buddha allows monks with damaged or painful feet to wear sandals.

The narrative continues that Monks in the monastery at night, while walking to a meeting, step on thorns and stub their toes on tree stumps that are invisible in the dark. So Buddha allows wearing of sandals inside the monastery while going to meetings at night. He also allows use of a torch or some night light, and a staff as a walking aid in the dark. With the rules now again loosened, the infamous group of six monks indulges in further sensual pleasure seeking. They try wooden shoes, which kill a lot of insects underfoot, and while strutting about in their wooden shoes smashing the insects they talk about “worldly talk” in loud and disturbing voices just for good measure. The “modest monks” complain both about the wooden shoes, the killing of the insects, and the loud worldly talk. They carry their complaints to the Buddha who then

says there will be no wooden shoes, which seems to also take care of the loud voices and worldly talk somehow.

But the rules prove to be still too loose. The group of six monks try wearing shoes from plants that cause death to insects in the construction of the sandals. They try shoes made of palmyra palms, made from young bamboo, grass shoes, reed shoes, shoes made of wool, gold, silver, crystal bronze, glass, tin, copper, and even lead. The text does not mention the quality of their conversation as they paced about in lead shoes, but it would presumably have been a bit heavy.

In turn, each of these variations is not allowed by the Buddha. He clarifies and tightens the too-loose areas of the Vinaya rules. Deterred, but not defeated, the group of six monks waits for their next chance to explore loopholes in the rules, so as to indulge in their favorite sensual pleasures.

In the meanwhile, the Buddha again recognizes the rules have in some ways become overly tight. He allows sandals at the privy, at the urinal, and sandals in the area where things are rinsed (Rinsing of clothes after washing? Rinsing of monks bowls after eating? Rinsing of hands after toilet trips?). While in the rinsing area, monks are allowed sandals (Vin. p.254).

Then comes a case where missionary monks whom the Buddha has sent to areas outside of the Ganges River plain encounter climatic conditions and social customs that make strict observance of some Vinaya rules quite difficult. With more flexibility and looseness needed, modifications are made. In one case the monk Ven. Kaccāna comes back from the frontier region of Avanti (Vin. p. 260) and reports to the Buddha that the ground there is very hard and full of stones and other sharp things, and the customs of the people are quite different from the areas around Magadha. The Buddha then allows sandals with multi layer linings to protect the feet of monks to be worn by the monks who are staying in Avanti, as well as some other relaxation of various rules.⁸ Life in Avanti is very different from that in the Ganges River area, so flexibility is allowed.

This brings our discussion of the narratives concerning sandals and the associated rules to a close, but in chapter 6 of the Mahāvagga, we read of rules being developed to serve the needs of the Saṅgha around the use of medicines. Again, the same dynamic can be seen in the text, with the rules being either too loose or too tight, and adjustments being made. Sometimes a rule needs to be adjusted, but the first attempt only partially

deals with the reality of the situation and further adjustments are made. As soon as there is an opening, that the rule is too loose in some way, we will again see the group of six monks promoting their indulgence in sensual pleasures. We will have a look at this section of the text.

The narrative concerning medicines begins at Sāvattḥī in the Jeta Grove in Anāthapiṇḍika's monastery. The following long narrative detailing the development of rules for the Saṅgha around the use of medicines is quite interesting for a number of reasons other than observing how the rules are fine tuned. The narrative gives an interesting picture of the *materia medica* and medical procedures that were in use in India of the 6th century BCE.

The text begins by explaining that a contagion has spread among the monks, causing them to be unable to hold down their food. They become “lean, wretched, of a bad colour, yellowish, and the veins standing out on their limbs.”⁹

Upon seeing this and getting information from Ānanda, the Buddha went into meditation. The text says

Then as the Blessed One was meditating in seclusion, a reasoning arose in his mind thus: “At present monks, afflicted by an affection occurring in Autumn, bring up the conje they have drunk and bring up the rice they have eaten. ...What now if I should allow medicine for monks?”....Then it occurred to the Blessed One: “These five medicines, that is to say ghee, fresh butter, oil, honey, molasses, are medicines and are agreed upon as medicines, and although they serve as nutriment for people yet they cannot be reckoned as substantial food. What now if I should allow monks to make use of these five medicines at the right time, if they have accepted them at the right time.”¹⁰

The Buddha is concerned about the health of the monks, hence his allowance of the five medicines. However, as these medicines (and many of those that are soon to follow in the narrative) are substances used also as food, he allows them to be accepted and used only “at the right time”, being the morning hours before midday.¹¹

This rule quickly proves to be still too tight. The morning hours are insufficient, so the Buddha allows the medicines to be accepted and used at any time. However, these five medicines prove insufficient for the various ailments of the monks, so a number of medicines are then allowed as ailments come up. First, tallows were needed, and then

allowed. Then medicinal roots of turmeric, ginger, oris root, white oris root, garlic, black hellebore, khus-khus, nut grass, and others were needed and then allowed..

Then the question of storage arises, as monks are not allowed to store food. The Buddha allows storage of the medicinal roots, which, presumably, are not always easy to procure. Also, with the roots it becomes necessary to provide tools for pounding the roots, which would be in addition to the few possessions allowed the monks. So the Buddha allows a set of grindstones for pounding the roots.

In turn, astringent decoctions, leaves, and fruits (listed as *vilāṅga*, pepper, black pepper, yellow myrobalam, beleric myrobalam, emblic myrobalam, goṭṭha fruit and others), resins and salts are also allowed. Again, the need for some tools for pounding and processing arises, so the Buddha allows a mortar and pestle and a cloth sifter. These medicines and the other medicines listed in the text are still widely used by traditional Ayurvedic medicine, which is widespread and used effectively to this date in India, Nepal, Sri Lanka and other south and southeast Asian countries.

So we see a number of significant loosening of the rules to accommodate the need for medical treatments for the monks. However, the next loosening proves to be an opening for the infamous group of six monks, who have been awaiting their chance to slip something in.

One monk has an illness affecting his eyes. For his benefit, and perhaps looking ahead a bit, the Buddha allows a number of ointments and ointment powders for eye treatments. However, the monks lacked adequate containers for the ointments and put them in small bowls and saucers, where they were contaminated with grass debris and dust. So the Buddha allows ointment boxes. This is what the group of six monks are waiting for. They try gold boxes and silver boxes. Seeing this, the Saṅgha came under criticism by the lay people, who say, “Like householders who enjoy pleasures of the senses.” In response, the Buddha disallows the gold and silver, and then lists the kinds of boxes to be allowed.¹²

Soon it becomes apparent that the boxes need a lid, which is allowed. But the lid falls off, so a thread is allowed to fix the lid to the box. Then the box splits, so it is allowed to wrap the box with the thread. In addition, the monks have only their fingers to dip in the ointment to spread on their afflicted eye, which somehow causes the eye to be

painful, perhaps due to dirty hands or fingers, not explained in the text. So the Buddha allows an ointment-stick.

Always lurking in the background, waiting for their chance, the group of six monks seizes upon the ointment stick as an object of sensual desire and gratification. They devise ointment sticks made of gold and of silver. The Buddha disallows this, and specifies a proper material for the ointment sticks, that of bone from the center of a conch shell.¹³

These deviations and rules may seem insignificant or nit-picky but in a renunciate lifestyle such as that of the monks and nuns, even what might seem insignificant possessions such as an ointment stick could prove to be an object of desire. It is this natural tendency of the mind to chase after sense objects that the group of six monks represents here. The Buddha has to keep the rules strict in order to prevent this kind of attachment to sense pleasures, while balancing this with the practical needs of the monks for good health and a modicum of physical ease.

In the Mahāvagga narrative, the need for simple medical technology continues to develop. All these containers and ointment sticks are difficult to carry around the monastery. So the Buddha allows a bag to hold the containers. Then he allows a strap for the bag and a thread to secure the strap to the bag. Due to other ailments of the monks and appropriate allowances made by the Buddha, the bag now contains nose spoons, tubes, lids for the tubes, and various vessels made of copper, wood and fruit (likely dried gourds, which serve as handy containers), in addition to the previously mentioned cloth sifters, mortar and pestle and so on. With the various roots, herbs, oils, and earthen minerals, we have not only a doctor's bag, but the makings of a small pharmacy. Considering that monks were allowed only a few personal belongings, this shows a great deal of flexibility and realism on the part of the Buddha.

It is likely that a few experienced monks, perhaps with some amount of previous medical training, began to serve as physicians for the other monks, and the bag of medicines and medical tools would have been kept in a convenient place in the monastery. This is the beginning of the tendency of Buddhist monks to become adept in medical treatment, and to later serve as healers for both the Saṅgha and the lay public. The Vinaya would have preserved the memory of certain ailments and their treatments, and also served as a source of medical knowledge and procedure. In later centuries it would have been supplemented and largely replaced as a medical sourcebook by successive texts used at the great Buddhist universities.¹⁴ But back to our story.

The narrative continues with a very interesting and predictable turn of events. The monks have need of medicines that are first boiled in oil and then preserved in alcohol.¹⁵ So the Buddha gives his permission to boil the oil, and put it in a medium of alcohol. Now we have herbal medicines in an alcohol base in the monks' quarters, and the group of six will not let this opportunity pass. Of course, they drink the preparations, and become drunk. The Buddha tightens the rules due to the temptation of alcohol being kept in the monastery premises. He makes it clear that there are strict procedures around the use and consumption of medicines containing alcohol. Violators will be "dealt with according to the rule".¹⁶

At this point we will leave the narrative on medicines, although it continues on at some length, as we hope our main point about the need for alternative loosening and tightening of rules has been amply illustrated by the previous examples. In the following pages of the *Mahāvagga*, techniques are added to help alleviate afflictions such as rheumatism of the limbs and joints, sores, various skin problems, snakebite, poison, constipation, and jaundice. The main loosening of the rules that occurs in these sections, especially in the case of snakebite and poisoning, which we can take to be emergency situations, is that the Buddha allows monks to go out and get the medicines as needed, it not being necessary to have them formally presented as a gift to a monk or to the Saṅgha by a lay person. This is a considerable departure from previous allowances, as monks can now attend to a snakebite or poisoned monk by foraging for whatever medications are needed.

We can see how the Vinaya constantly steers the middle path between extremes of sensual indulgence and painful asceticism. The Buddha sought a middle way of life for his saṅgha, one in which practice could be the main focus of life. He recognized that sensual pleasures and painful asceticism would not allow the mind to be calm and steady, so he steered a middle course between these two extremes, for the benefit of his followers.

NOT TOO TIGHT AND NOT TOO LOOSE IN MEDITATION:

Now we return to the Buddha's teaching on proper tuning of the lute with respect to meditation. That proper tuning of the mind during meditation is of enormous importance as shown by the story itself. When Ven. Soṇa was too tight in his meditation, he was injuring himself physically, becoming frustrated, and getting ready to disrobe and return

to lay life. After following the Buddha's instructions and finding a harmonious way of meditating, he experienced Arhatship.

So, what does it mean in meditation to be "properly tuned", to be neither too loose nor too tight?

The easier part to understand is that of "too loose". Our minds seek to maximize pleasure and minimize discomfort. The mind, called "the flickering, fickle mind" in the Dhammapada,¹⁷ races from one object of desire to another, and creates grasping, clinging, the building of habitual formations, and the whole mass of suffering as a result. Merely sitting in so-called meditation is no deliverance from this pattern. The mind may become lethargic, sleepy, and drop away from any alertness or awareness.

So what is "too tight", which led Ven. Soṇa to leave blood on the trail? The Buddha was an expert on knowing what it was like to be too tight, as he had gone through extremes of self-mortification. In the Majjima Nikāya, the Greater Discourse to Saccaka,¹⁸ the Buddha tells of his former ascetic practice, "I thought: 'Suppose with my teeth clenched and my tongue pressed against the roof of my mouth, I beat down, constrain, and crush mind with mind.' " He relates how this, and related practices didn't work and nearly killed him. Then, on the point of death, he remembered,

*I recall that when my father the Sakyan was occupied, while I was still sitting in the cool shade of a rose-apple tree, quite secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unwholesome states, I entered upon and abided in the first jhāna, which is accompanied by applied and sustained thought, with joy and happiness born of seclusion. Could that be the path to enlightenment? Then following on that memory, came the realization: 'That indeed is the path to enlightenment.'*¹⁹

Nearly dead from extreme over tightening, the Buddha had remembered a time in his childhood when he had naturally and with attention but without strain attained a high level of meditative consciousness. Following the path to enlightenment suggested by this memory, he experienced nibbāna. When it came time for him to share his discoveries, he taught his disciples a way of meditation that is in a sense non-meditation or un-meditation. It is through letting go rather than through acquiring something that the end of suffering is achieved. Letting go of what? Letting go of the whole structure of self-grasping fed by desire, aversion, and ignorance.

Ven. Soṇa had been grasping for nibbāna until he left a trail of blood and was caught in his frustration, ready to quit the monk's life. Once he learned to relax his tension, stay alert and attentive, and let go of his habitual ego structure, he was able to find real peace and happiness. The Buddha's approach to meditation allowed him to do just that.

Nibbāna is not a thing, and cannot be grasped. Peter Harvey, having surveyed the suttas says about nibbāna, "The most accurate and least misleading descriptions are negative, saying what it [nibbāna] is *not*." ²⁰ In the Udāna the Buddha says,

There is, bhikkhus, a not-born, a not-brought-to-being, a not-made, a not-conditioned. If, bhikkhus, there were no not-born, not-brought-to-being, not-made, not-conditioned, no escape would be discerned from what is born, brought-to-being, made, conditioned. But since there is a not-born, a not-brought-to-being, a not-made, a not-conditioned, therefore an escape is discerned from what is born, brought-to-being, made, conditioned. ²¹

So the question arises, how can nibbāna which is no "thing", nothing at all, and yet can be experienced, how can it be reached by thought, analysis, imagination, or by techniques such as single-pointed concentration or absorption meditation, through bearing down as Ven. Soṇa unsuccessfully tried to do? It is a very crucial point, as many people when meditating find that their minds (naturally) wander, and that they think they are somehow failing to find a quiet mind leading to the higher stages. Often, the response on their part, and of that of their teachers, is to bear down harder, to concentrate on the object of meditation until all else is excluded.

Peter Harvey tells us, "Buddhist meditation, in common with many other forms of meditation such as Hindu yoga, aims to cultivate the power of concentration till it can become truly 'one-pointed', with 100 percent of the attention focused on a chosen object. In such a state of samādhi (concentration or collectedness), the mind becomes free from all distraction and wavering, in a unified state of inner stillness."²² As expressed by Harvey, this striving for one-pointedness of concentration, to the exclusion of all extraneous thoughts has largely become the norm in both the teaching and the practice of meditation. This school of thought which promotes a rigorous one-pointed concentration or absorption meditation has become the predominant view in most of the Buddhist world. This is true of most meditation practices in Theravāda,

Mahāyāna, and Vajrāyāna. Perhaps it is time to question the assumption that “100 percent of the attention focused on a chosen object” is the approach the Buddha was teaching and the best way to experience higher states of consciousness and nibbāna.

If such concentration is done in a way that creates tension in the meditator, especially over a prolonged period of time, it may lead to unfavorable physical and mental results, sometimes even to damage. In addition, it may be counterproductive when it comes to letting go of the hindrances and calming of the mind. Trying to calm the mind through intense concentration is rather like seeing the waves on the surface of a pond and trying to still them by putting the palm of your hand down on the surface of the water. Even if thoughts and emotions can be temporarily stopped by such a method, it is more of the nature of suppression than any real deep change. Although the front door of the mind is closed due to intense concentration, the suppressed thoughts and feelings have not disappeared, they are lurking in a dark, quiet place and will likely climb in through the back window. In fact, ego’s game may be strengthened by such an approach.

We have to face the fact that Ven. Soṇa’s blood on the trail has its counterparts in our modern day meditation centers. Not all is rosy out there, with many cases of severe physical and mental reactions to meditative practices that are done under the guidance of Buddhist teachers.²³ Some of the problems are due to the initial condition of the people who take up intense forms of meditation, but many problems may be attributed to the overly tight meditation practices themselves. Caution is warranted. And techniques we assume are good for anyone need to be reexamined with a view to making sure the meditator does not undergo undue stress and strain, especially in the beginning stages.

In his thorough and insightful book Satipatthāna, Bhikkhu Anālayo points out, “It was this balanced ‘middle path’ approach, avoiding the two extremes of stagnation and excessive striving, which had enabled him (Buddha) to gain awakening.” He cites two meditation teachers, Bhikkhu Khantipalo and Ven. Vimalaramsi, who “warn against the dangers of overstraining or forcing meditation and the emotional disturbances and hardening of the mind that may ensue.”²⁴

An example of a Buddhist meditation approach that avoids the extremes of too tight and too loose can be found in the book The Breath of Love, by Ven. Bhante Vimalaramsi Mahāthera, in which Bhante gives his guidelines to Tranquil Wisdom Insight Meditation (TWIM).²⁵ This is one approach that helps people find a harmonious approach to liberating

the mind. If people are sometimes being physically or mentally injured by overly intense approaches to meditation we would suggest following the Buddha's advice to Ven. Soṇa and retuning the approach to bring about harmony rather than stress or tension. Perhaps much can be learned from those like Ven. Vimalaramsi who are careful to avoid the extremes of too loose and too tight.

CONCLUSION:

In the earliest days of the Buddha's teaching career, he gave no behavioral rules at all, relying only on the power of his suggestions and the sincerity and virtue of his disciples.²⁶ It was with the growth of the Saṅgha, lack of direct contact with the Buddha, lack of proper instruction,²⁷ and the entry into the Saṅgha of people of mixed motivation that the need for rules and regulations arose. With the growth in numbers, the monks became a society, and all societies need some sort of internal regulation to ensure harmonious lifestyle. There were also considerations of the interaction between the Saṅgha and the lay public. Yet the main purpose of the rules was always to ensure a living environment that was conducive to meditation and spiritual progress, to the life of Brahmachariya, both in terms of outer behavior and in terms of inner attitude.

As Jotiya Dhirasekera observes in Buddhist Monastic Discipline: "It is in fact a healthy and peaceful independence of the mind and the body that is aimed at in the religious life which the Buddha prescribed. While the body is distressed no control or concentration of the mind could ever be achieved. Keeping this in mind the Buddha decried not only the baser forms of austerities which weary the body but also excessive striving, even though such striving may be channeled in the right direction...Clean and healthy living, both in mind and in body was the rule. The Buddha saw no reason to retreat from physical and mental well-being as long as it was not mingled with and contaminated by sensual pleasures."²⁸

For both social and outward behavior, as well as for the inner attitude of the monk or nun, the middle path of avoiding all extremes so as to cultivate a mind capable of spiritual development was always put forward. This correct tuning of the behavior and of the mind, not too tight, not too loose, is the message of the very first discourse of the Buddha to the five ascetics at the Deer Park at Isipathana in Bārāṇasī. As the sutta says,

*“There the Blessed One addressed the bhikkhus of the group of five thus: Bhikkhus, these two extremes should not be followed by one who has gone forth into homelessness. What two? The pursuit of sensual happiness in sensual pleasures, which is low, vulgar, the way of worldlings, ignoble, unbeneficial; and the pursuit of self-mortification, which is painful, ignoble, unbeneficial. Without veering towards either of these extremes, the Tathāgata has awakened to the middle way, which gives rise to vision, which gives rise to knowledge, which leads to peace, to direct knowledge, to Nibbāna.”*²⁹

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NOTES:

¹ Vinaya Piṭaka Volume V, Mahāvagga, p.237 (henceforth “Vin.”); Ven. Soṇa’s story also occurs in Aṅguttara Nikāya.III.374-9 (PTS) or located in Chapter of the Sixes, number 98 in the Aṅguttara Nikāya Anthology, translation by Nāṇaponika Thera and Bhikkhu Bodhi (2007). The story is largely in agreement in the two versions, but the Vinaya version is longer.

²Vin., p.237

³Ibid., p.241

⁴ Ibid., p.244, I have replaced the translation of bhagavā, the term used to address the Buddha with “Blessed One” rather than the term “Lord” which is used by I.B Horner and is a misleading translation.

⁵ Ibid., pp. 245-60 for the narrative concerning sandals.

⁶ See Wijayaratna’s discussion in Buddhist Nuns, pp.28-9, and footnotes 12 and 13 on those pages.

⁷ For Ven. Sāti’s wrong view see Mahā-taṇha-saṅkhaya Sutta, MN 38 (PTS I.255), for Ven. Ariṭṭha’s wrong behavior, which Richard F. Gombrich believes was indulgence in sexual intercourse (Gombrich, 1996), see Alagaddūpama Sutta, MN 22 (PTS I.130). These examples show that Buddha quickly brought those who were caught in wrong view or indulging in inappropriate behavior into his presence for admonition. That the group of six monks was never brought in after numerous episodes of purposely provocative behavior shows they are a fiction, merely a literary device for illustrating the need to tighten various permutations of the rules. It is possible this fictionalized group could be based on a real group of six monks whose behavior had garnered them a bad reputation among their fellow monks. Then they became legend, and a literary device for the compilers of the Vinaya..

The number six used in an adversarial way occurs in the suttas as the “six heretical masters” who are named as real people, but are usually grouped together as a literary device. See Lamotte, 1988, p.20 for a discussion of that.

⁸ Lamotte points out (Lamotte, 1988, p.21) that Buddha had declined an invitation from King Caṇḍa Pradyota of Avanti, but had sent two eminent disciples, Ven. Mahākātyāyana (Pali: Mahākaccana) and Ven. Śroṇa Koṭṭikarṇa (Pali: Soṇa Kuṭṭikarṇa), not the same Ven. Soṇa as in our story above, to represent him in Avanti. This kingdom was located in modern day Madhya Pradesh State of central India, near the city Ujjain.

At the time, this was a “frontier” area, with life being much rougher than in the more civilized Ganges plains. The Mahāvagga details numerous special allowances given by Buddha to the monks in this area, including the more heavy duty sandals that are noted in the narrative above.

⁹ Vin. P.269

¹⁰ Ibid., p.269, We have substituted “Blessed One” for the epithet “Lord” which is used in I.B. Horner’s translation, as in fn 4 above.

¹¹ Ibid., p.270

¹² Ibid., p.275-6

¹³ Ibid., p.276

¹⁴ Warder (1970) lists numerous Buddhist universities and colleges in addition to the famous Nālandā at which medicine would have been among the important subjects taught to monks and lay students by the 5th century C.E., pp.442-443.

¹⁵ In contemporary herbal medicine, many medicinal essences are extracted from herbs by putting them in alcohol, and this then acts as a preservative as well, the medicine being a “tincture”. In some cases, the alcohol itself may serve as a medicine, not only as a preservative. It is possible that the oil that was boiled and then put into the alcohol medium was not only oil, but contained herbal essences that had already been extracted. This is a common procedure in herbal medicine but the text makes no mention of the herbs at this point.

¹⁶ Vin., p.278

¹⁷ Dhammapada (Narada Trans.) v.33, in the Pāli: Phandanam capalam cittam

¹⁸ MN.36.20 (PTS: MN I.242)

¹⁹ MN.36.31 (PTS: MN I.246) At the suggestion of Ven. Vimalaramsi Mahathera, I have substituted the word “joy” for the word “rapture” and the word “happiness” for “pleasure” as that seems a more workable and practical translation.

²⁰ Harvey, 2004, p.62

²¹ Udāna.8.8.3, Ireland trans.1997

²² Harvey, 2004, pp.246-7

²³ To get an idea of what meditation teachers and practitioners need be careful of, see “Can Meditation Be Bad for You?” article in *Humanist*, Sept/Oct 2007. The article quotes meditation teachers such as Dalai Lama who caution against approaching meditation and strong concentration exercises too quickly. It reports on people who have had severe reactions to various meditation approaches. Some styles of meditation initially create more stress and imbalance for the meditator, not less. Ideally, an approach to meditation should immediately help people find balance, and should be immediately beneficial. This would avoid any “blood on the trail” such as in Ven. Soṇa’s story.

Available on the web:
<http://www.thehumanist.org/humanist/MaryGarden.html>

²⁴ Analayo, 2003, p.38, see also footnote 37 for the reference to Ven. Khantipalo and Ven. Vimalaramsi and their warnings based on their experience in teaching numerous meditators.

²⁵ Vimalaramsi, Ven. Bhante, (2012), In his book, Ven. Vimalaramsi Mahathera carefully lays out a case for a sutta-based meditation approach that includes a relax step so that mental and physical tension do not accumulate in the meditator. In Bhante's system, the object of meditation is not to be held with intense concentration, but rather it (the object of meditation, such as awareness of breathing) serves as a reminder to be present in the moment. TWIM aims to provide the meditator with a structure within which he or she can remain alert and aware, yet relaxed and open. For more on this, see Bhante's book The Breath of Love, or the Dhammasukha website www.dhammasukha.org

²⁶ see Dhirasekera, 1982, p. 83 for a discussion of this.

²⁷ The lack of proper instruction for new monks and the Buddha's creation of the system of novice and preceptor (saddhivihārika and upajjhāya) is discussed in Banerjee (1991), pp.35-6. Banerjee also notes the Buddha's motivation for changing rules as circumstances changed on pp.31-2.

²⁸ Dhirasekera, 1982, pp.75-6

²⁹ SN V.56.11, Bhikku Bodhi translation, (S. V. 421 PTS)