

# In the seen there is only mere seen: an analysis of the meditation instructions in *Māluñkyaputta Sutta*<sup>1</sup>



Ven. PJ Paññādīpa [Kah Poh Tan]

Shan State Buddhist University, Phaya Phyu Qrt., Taunggyi, Myanmar;

Centre of Buddhist Studies, the University of Hong Kong, Pokfulam Rd., Hong Kong.

Email: pannadipa5587@gmail.com

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## ABSTRACT

There are three discourses in Pāli *Nikāya* which record important encounters between Ven. *Māluñkyaputta* and the Buddha. Of which the *Māluñkyaputta sutta* in *Samyutta Nikāya* (S IV 72) narrates how the Buddha offers Ven. *Māluñkyaputta* a brief yet powerful meditation injunction that eventually leads him to irrevocable liberation. This rather succinct teaching: ‘In the seen, heard and cognized there are only mere seen, heard and cognized’ becomes a subject of much interest and debate in today’s meditation community. Recently it was used to support the legitimacy for the practice of bare awareness in the popular culture of mindfulness practice. This paper seeks to throw light on the meditation instructions received by Ven. *Māluñkyaputta*, with special focus on the aspects relating to the cultivation of liberating insight. How the above instruction is conceived and practiced in two influential meditation lineages in Myanmar, i.e. the Māhasi and Pa-Auk traditions, will also be discussed.

**Keywords:** insight meditation, mindfulness, sense bases, papañca, Māhasi, Pa-Auk

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<sup>1</sup>S IV 72.

## Introduction

*Those who in youth have not led the holy life, or have failed to acquire wealth, languish like old cranes in the pond without fish.*

*Those who in youth have not led the holy life, or have failed to acquire wealth, lie sighing over the past, like worn out arrows (shot from) a bow.<sup>2</sup>*

(Dhp 155-156)

The above *Dhammapada*'s verse, perhaps, may describe the crisis *Ven. Māluñkyaputta* found himself in when he came to see The Buddha enquiring for a brief meditation instruction in hopes of gaining spiritual breakthrough. Burdened by advanced age, *Ven. Māluñkyaputta* appeared to have devoted most of his life seeking answers to those unbeneficial, speculative metaphysical questions.<sup>3</sup> In the *Mahā-Māluñkyaputta-sutta*, he was shown to adhere rigidly to certain wrong views and reproached by the Buddha.<sup>4</sup> Overall, the *Nikāyas* seem to portray him as a confused spiritual seeker with a haughty and obstinate nature. Nevertheless, the Buddha managed to offer him some meditation guidance that is perfectly tailored to his ripening spiritual faculty that eventually led to his full awakening.

This paper aims at throwing light on the meditation instructions received by *Ven. Māluñkyaputta* in the *Māluñkyaputta-sutta*,<sup>5</sup> particularly on the aspects relating to the cultivation of liberating insight that forms the central part of Buddhist meditation. How the above instruction is understood and practiced in two contemporary and influential meditation lineages in Myanmar will also be discussed.

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<sup>2</sup> *acaritvā brahmacariyam aladdhā yobbane dhanam jinñakoñcā va jhāyanti khīñamacche va pallale, acaritvā brahmacariyam aladdhā yobbane dhanam senti cāpātikhīñā va purāñāni anutthunam;* English translation from Buddharakkhita, A., **The Dhammapada: The Buddha's Path of Wisdom** (Kandy, 1985), p. 32.

<sup>3</sup> M I 426: *Māluñkyaputta* was reprimanded by the Buddha for threatening to leave the Saṅgha if the Buddha did not answer him the ten undeclared questions that were actually borne of the thicket of personality view (*Sakkāyaditthi*).

<sup>4</sup> M I 432: *Māluñkyaputta* holds that beings are fettered only when there is arising of fetters without considering the hidden, dormant (*anusaya*) form of fetters. The Buddha uses the simile of an infant to refute his wrong views.

<sup>5</sup> S IV 72.

## Readiness of *Māluñkyaputta* for Buddha's Brief Instruction

It would seem that the Buddha tried to belittle *Māluñkyaputta* about his mature age which might prevent him benefiting from a brief instruction he asked to receive.<sup>6</sup> The commentary, however, proposes a simultaneous extolment of the Buddha to *Māluñkyaputta*, considering his enthusiasm for practice undeterred by old age would set a role model for the younger monks.<sup>7</sup>

In my own reading, I would think that the Buddha's seemingly sarcastic reaction would rightly serve to increase the determination and sense of urgency for practice in *Māluñkyaputta*. The latter's humble tone and assertive confidence that he could become an heir to the Buddha Dhamma show the quality of a spiritually-maturing person readily to engage in serious practice. Apparently this impelled the Buddha to give *Māluñkyaputta* a deep teaching similar to that offered to *Ven. Bāhiya* with swift wisdom.<sup>8</sup> Following the Buddha's brief statements, *Māluñkyaputta* was able to explicate them in detail that earned the approval of the Buddha. This shows that he has fully grasped the essence of the Buddha's instruction. Therefore, *Māluñkyaputta* has had a strong faith and understanding in the Buddha's teachings prior to receiving the Buddha's specific instruction. The Buddha's reminder of his seniority in age would thus invoke an impetus to make his resolve firm for the highest goal.

## The Six Sense Bases

The six sense bases, which constitute the totality of our experiential world, become the principal meditation theme on which the Buddha directed *Māluñkyaputta* to contemplate. It is through these sensory apparatuses we establish contact and relationship with this world. Pleasing objects which produce pleasant feelings experienced via the six sense doors are what conditions our craving and clinging. Whereas separation from the objects we avidly

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<sup>6</sup>On *Māluñkyaputta*'s request, the Buddha says, "What should I say to the young monks when a bhikkhu like you – old, aged, advanced in life, come to the last stage – asks me for an exhortation in brief?

<sup>7</sup>Spk II 383; footnote of B. Bodhi, **The Connected Discourses of the Buddha** (Sommerville, 2000), p. 1410.

<sup>8</sup>Ud 6: *Ven. Bāhiya* received similar meditation instructions from the Buddha and shortly after attained Arahantship. He's known among the Buddha's disciples to be the quickest in attaining final liberation.

crave, or experiencing unpleasing objects in turn gives rise to aversion. Without ever seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching and cognizing, such dichotomous feelings that bring forth craving and aversion will not arise. And craving-clinging is the dictating volition (*cetanā*) cum karmic force<sup>9</sup> that fuels the perpetual cycle of re-becoming in *samsāra*. It is precisely subject to such danger and shortcomings that the six-sense bases are compared to the baits and realm of *Māra*.<sup>10</sup> Hence, by mindfully guarding the six-sense bases, one may evade the snare of *Māra* and transcend birth and death.

## In the Experienced There is Only Mere Experienced

After illustrating to *Mālunkyaputta* the role of the six sense bases in the origination of craving, the Buddha began to deliver the antidotal practice which could divert craving at the sense bases into emancipating wisdom. This brief and yet extremely profound meditation instruction contains the most succinct and direct application of key Buddhist doctrines into practice. To some early disciples of sharp faculty, this instruction has been sufficient to lead them to irrevocable freedom.<sup>11</sup>

In brief, the Buddha instructed that with regard to everything seen, heard, and cognized, we have to contemplate them as merely seen, heard, and cognized.<sup>12</sup> In short, to whatever we experienced through the six sense bases there is only the mere experienced. By this practice, we will not be ‘by that’, nor “therein”; thereby neither will we be here, nor beyond, nor in between the two – this itself is the end of suffering.

It must have puzzled most interpreters as to what this terse instruction really means. *Sāratthappakāsinī* provides a lengthy commentary defining “merely” as setting up the limit

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<sup>9</sup> A III 410: The Buddha declares, “Volition is *kamma*; by volition one performs *kamma* by body, speech and deeds.”

<sup>10</sup> S I 251; S I 254: The *Māra* says, “The eye, forms, eye-contact and its base of consciousness are mine. Where can you go, ascetic, to escape from me?” Similar claims also apply to the other five senses. *Māra* here could be a metaphor of defilement and death.

<sup>11</sup> Ud 6; S IV 72.

<sup>12</sup> S IV 73, 12: ...diṭṭha-muta-viññātabbesu dhammesu diṭṭhe diṭṭhamattam bhavissati sute sutamattam bhavissati mute mutamatta bhavissati viññātē viññātamuttam bhavissati.

(*mattā ti pamāṇam*) for the six sense cognition against invasion of lust, hatred and delusion.<sup>13</sup> Such delimitation of senses is similarly recorded in a parallel Chinese *Samyuktāgama-sūtra* descended from the *Sarvāstivāda* School.<sup>14</sup> Here, an unequivocal advice to bring direct sense experiences staying truly to their own sphere of experiencing is given. Practicing this way, one's mind will not be intruded by that (*na tena*) of any unwholesome factors and attached therein (*na tattha*). In effect, any longing, vacillation or rejection will find no ground to thrive and establish – neither here (*nevidha*), nor beyond (*na huram*), nor in between the two (*na ubhayamantarena*). For one disentangling the mental knots thus, *Nibbāna* is said to be close by.

From the outset such sense-guarding practice of placing mindfulness on sense contacts and experiences may seem uncharacteristic of many other instructions scattered in Pāli *Nikāya*. For example, the Buddha in other discourses urges the monk not to abide by the sign and feature when encountering sensory objects so that the unwholesome mind does not assail him.<sup>15</sup> This sense-restraint instruction appears alike to that given to *Mālunkyaputta*, albeit often prescribed as a preliminary training that aids further development of concentration and insight. Being itself a powerful meditation that can be steered toward liberating insight, the instructions to *Mālunkyaputta* would certainly be more than just a safeguarding practice of sense experience. It likely encompasses a deeper proficiency of insight knowledge which goes beyond the succinct descriptions in the sutta. That is, acquiring penetrative insight by seeing how sense consciousness arises in contact with respective sense objects upon which habitual, deeply ingrained defilements manifest may be necessary in actual practice.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Spk II 383-384; footnote of B. Bodhi, **The Connected Discourses of the Buddha** (Sommerville, 2000), pp. 1410-1411: I will set up my mind with adverting as the limit, not allowing it to go beyond and arise by way of lust, hatred or delusion.

<sup>14</sup> SĀ 312 摩罗迦舅经 (Mo-Luo-Jia-Jiu jin) (T ii089c24): 见以见为量 (seeing as the measure or boundary for the seen).

<sup>15</sup> A II 39; A III 161; A III 157.

<sup>16</sup> M III 215; Spk II 383-384: Discernment, by direct knowledge and right wisdom, of how sense experiences originate and vanish upon the interplay of sense bases, sense objects and resulting consciousnesses is crucial to unravel their impermanent, suffering and non-self nature.

## Conceptual Elaboration (*Papañca*)

Guarding our mind from wandering far from the bare experience at the six-sense bases is an effective remedy against *Papañca* (mental or conceptual proliferation) rooted in greed (*lobha*), conceit (*māna*) and wrong views (*diṭṭhi*).<sup>17</sup> *Papañca* is a mind tendency to add narrative to the perception of sense experience by creating diversified concepts/notions,<sup>18</sup> a process akin to conceiving (*maññanā*) mentioned in *Mūlapariyāya-sutta*<sup>19</sup>. A common outcome of this cognitive process is mislabeling sense experiences as I, mine, and this is my “Self” with respect to past, future and present forms. Such erroneous identification besets us into self-created drama, a springboard to the three hallucinations (*vipallāsa*)<sup>20</sup> and all sorts of defilement. Hence, by recognizing this process as nothing to delight in, the underlying tendencies of the taints (*āsava*) will come to cease. In many discourses, stilling the process of *papañca*, particularly on “personalizing” our sense experience, is the path to liberation.<sup>21</sup> In fact, the major goal of insight meditation is to uproot the above hallucinations of perception, consciousness and view.<sup>22</sup>

Meanwhile, effort to safeguard the mind from defilements is in line with right effort (*samma-vāyama*)<sup>23</sup> and right mindfulness (*samma-sati*) based upon the four foundations of mindfulness.<sup>24</sup> By applying the mind in wholesome ways with wisdom in accordance

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<sup>17</sup> Nāṇamoli, B. and B. Bodhi, **The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha** (Sommerville, 1995), p. 1199.

<sup>18</sup> M I 108: Dependent on eye and forms, eye consciousness arises. The meeting of the three is contact. With contact, feeling arises. When one feels one perceives. When one perceives, one thinks about. When one thinks, one mentally proliferates with notions or imaginations that subsequently beset him.

<sup>19</sup> M I 1: For a *puthujjana*, having conceiving earth as earth, he conceives himself in or apart from earth; he conceives earth to be his self or owned by him, he delights in earth. Why is that? Because he has not fully understood it.

<sup>20</sup> They are hallucinations in perception (*saññāvipallāsa*), consciousness (*cittavipallāsa*) and view (*diṭṭhivipallāsa*).

<sup>21</sup> D II 263; M I 108; Sn 862-877; Sn 915-934: “He should put an entire stop to the root of *papañca* – ‘I am the thinker...’”

<sup>22</sup> Ledi Sayadaw, **The Manual of Insight: Vipassanā Dipānī** (Kandy, 2007), p. 6.

<sup>23</sup> S V 8: A monk who strives for non-arising of unwholesome mind and abandoning already arisen unwholesome mind. And he strives for arising of wholesome mind and bringing arisen wholesome mind to increase and culmination.

<sup>24</sup> Weismann, S. ‘The importance of wise attention in meditation’, **The Wheel Publication** no. 463 (Kandy, 2011), pp. 8-9.

with reality also fulfils the practice of wise attention (*yoniso-manasikāra*). And by virtue of wise attention, there is direct knowing and seeing that eventually destroys all mental taints (*āsava*).<sup>25</sup>

## Does Bare Awareness the Key Teaching in *Mulūkyaputta-Sutta*?

In a recent paper Anālayo has proposed that attending to sense experiences within the confines of experience appears to be supportive of a bare, non-judgmental awareness that was indeed taught by the Buddha.<sup>26</sup> This rebuttal attempt is purported to recent criticisms which asserted that this popular module in today's mindfulness practice is a recent innovation without any clear support from scriptures and unrelated to the Buddhist soteriological goal.<sup>27</sup> Quoting the late Ven. Nyanaponika Thera's work,<sup>28</sup> Anālayo argues that bare awareness is a valid meditative practice founded in *satipaṭṭhāna*.<sup>29</sup> It is a key component for the practice of mindfulness and clear comprehension (*sati-sampajañña*) aligned well with the right purpose and suitability of an action. In long-term practice a state of continuous mindfulness may gradually be established, thereby leading one to dwell independently, without clinging to anything in this world.<sup>30</sup>

Nevertheless, whether or not by just maintaining an aloof, non-engaging mode of awareness toward sense experience would be enough to uproot our deep-rooted ignorance remains a question. In many discourses the Buddha reiterates the necessity of a direct knowing and seeing as it truly is (*yathā-bhūtaṃ*) the five aggregates (alternatively 12 sense

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<sup>25</sup> M I 6: The Buddha says, "...the destruction of *āsava* is for one who knows and sees, not for one who does not know and see. Who knows and sees what? Wise attention and unwise attention."

<sup>26</sup> Analayo, B. 'The Bāhiya and Bare Awareness.' **The Indian International Journal of Buddhist Studies**, 19, p. 1.

<sup>27</sup> Thānissaro, B., **Right Mindfulness, Memory & Ardency on the Buddhist Path** (California, 2012), p. 61; Sharf, Daniel M., **A Less Traveled Path: Saddharmasmṛtypasthānasūtra Chapter 2, Critical Edited with a Study on its Structure and Significance for the Development of Buddhist Meditation** (Vienna/Beijing, 2015), p. 475.

<sup>28</sup> Nyanaponika, T., **The Heart of Buddhist Meditation** (Kandy, 1992), p. 30.

<sup>29</sup> Analayo, B. 'The Bāhiya and Bare Awareness.' **The Indian International Journal of Buddhist Studies**, 19, pp. 13-16.

<sup>30</sup> M I 57; D II 292: *Atthi kāyo'ti vā pana'ssasati pacupatṭhitā hoti yāvadeva nāṇa-mattāya patissati-mattāya. Anissito ca viharati na ca kiñci loke upādīyatī.*

bases or 18 elements) in order to win liberation.<sup>31</sup> This precisely points to why wisdom/insight (*paññā*) has been the consummate part of the Buddhist three-fold training. Even though *Māluṅkyaputta* might have equipped with sharp faculty to understand a brief teaching of the Buddha, he very likely had to develop penetrative insight into the workings and true characteristics of the six sense bases to reach the further shore. Hence, Anālayo's thesis that a simple practice of bare awareness would have formulated the key teaching in *Māluṅkyaputta-sutta* warrants further considerations.

## Contemporary Meditation Instructions

To further address how to practice the meditation as per in this *sutta*, I would like to draw on instructions from two contemporary meditation lineages in Myanmar: Māhasi and Pa-Auk's traditions. These two internationally renowned traditions have referred to ample Pāli canonical as well as commentarial sources in giving their meditation guidance.

Māhasi Sayadaw prescribes an initial mentally-noting method: seeing, hearing, etc. as simply seeing, hearing, etc.<sup>32</sup> When insight progresses with increasing vigilant mindfulness on the sense doors, yogi will be able to seize the five-sense door cognitive process from further venturing to the mind-door cognitive processes where concepts (*paññatti*) regarding the form of sense objects emerge. If one is embroiled in ignorance, such concepts will conceal the true nature of the object and become the subject of obsession.<sup>33</sup> This unawareness is the very source of our craving-clinging. With such direct knowledge of the workings of six-sense bases and a deeper discernment of the three universal characteristics – impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and non-self – of all experiential phenomena, the gateway to liberation ensues.

Overall, the Māhasi's meditation method is a direct application of unwavering mindfulness to the impermanent nature of sense experience as presented moment by moment at the six sense doors. This approach exercises directed mindfulness and clear comprehension with a right frame of understanding toward the universal signs of all

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<sup>31</sup> S III 26-27; S IV 17-18: Bhikkhu, without directly knowing and fully understanding the all (i.e. 5 aggregates, 12 sense bases, or 18 elements), without developing dispassion toward it and abandoning it, no one is capable of conquering suffering.

<sup>32</sup> Māhasi Sayadaw, **A Discourse on Māluṅkyaputta Sutta** (2013), p. 15.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, pp. 9-16. Details of how concept knowledge is formed please see pp. 11-12.

experiences. Contrary to simply bare awareness, this meditation technique rigorously engages mindfulness connected with wisdom.

The Pa-Auk's tradition founded by Pa-Auk Sayadaw (Ven. Āciṇṇa) could be the first and foremost *Samathayānīka* lineage today which promotes a deep concentration up to access concentration (*upacāra samādhi*) or meditative absorption (*jhāna*) as a basis for insight meditation. It is based on the premise that a concentrated mind free from five hindrances can see the things as they really are, leading to liberating knowledge and vision (*ñāṇadassana*) and finally destruction of *āsava*.<sup>34</sup> The guideline of the Pa-Auk's instructions largely adheres to *Visuddhimagga*, offering a systematic scheme in developing progressive levels of concentration, analytical and insight knowledge that pave way to realizing *Nibbāna*.

Briefly, aided by a steadfast, luminous mind based on strong concentration, the yogi is first instructed to discern the ultimate reality (*paramattha*) of materiality (*rūpa*) and mentality (*nāma*) internally and externally<sup>35</sup> in according to the enumeration list in *Dhammasaṅgaṇī*.<sup>36</sup> This is followed by discerning the workings of five sense-door and mind-door cognitive processes.<sup>37</sup> With respect to the instructions in *Mālunkyaputta-sutta*, attention shall now be placed on how the instantaneous process of mentality carries out entirely autonomously as triggered by sense objects interacting with respective sense bases.<sup>38</sup> Amidst such fleeting processes there is only a serial chain of causes and effects taking place in accord with the laws of conditionality. There hardly anyone or specific agent who can stop or take charge of it. From this analytical approach a deep insight into the dependently-originated, selfless nature of sense experience may be attained. One would then understand by own direct knowledge in the process of experienced there is truly only just the experienced.

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<sup>34</sup> A II 44-45; S III 13: Develop concentration, bhikkhus. A concentrated mind understands according to reality the suffering, the origin of suffering, the end of suffering and the path leading to the end of suffering.

<sup>35</sup> Internally means within the boundary of own five aggregates or sense bases, externally is of other beings. Note this instruction – internally, externally, and internally and externally – constitutes a common refrain module in discourses on *satipathāna* (M I 57; D II 292).

<sup>36</sup> Pa-Auk Sayadaw, **Knowing and Seeing 4<sup>th</sup> revised ed.** (Singapore: 2010), pp. 137-140, 160-162.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, pp.164-170.

<sup>38</sup> Pa-Auk Sayadaw, **The Only Way for the Realization of Nibbāna** (Singapore, 2013), pp. 10-22.

In the nutshell, the Pa-Auk's meditation tradition emphasizes on cultivating a comprehensive analytical knowledge into the uncontrollable process of sense experience. Approaching from this angle, liberating wisdom may arise from a thorough understanding of the conditioned and non-self nature underlies all sense experiences. Although the Pa-Auk's method appears to be quite different from that of Māhasi, both do share a principal ground in that making cultivation of wisdom the major goal of mind training.

## Conclusion: The Taintless Arahant

The perfect understanding of *Ven. Mālunkyaputta* on the abridged instructions of the Buddha has enabled him to practice accordingly and attained the irrevocable liberation of Arahantship. This unsurpassed freedom likely came to him after some strenuous exertion, as hinted in a *Theragāthā*'s verse attributed to him:

*Indolence (laziness) is defilement; defilement arises from indolence; by energy and knowledge one should pluck out one's own dart.*<sup>39</sup> (Th 404)

With his consciousness no longer fastened on any sense experience, *Ven. Mālunkyaputta* has gone over the world and fully realized what is to be realized by a fully enlightened one with regard to the six-sense bases. Having seen what can be seen, he does not misconceive the seen, he does not misconceive the unseen, he does not misconceive what can be seen, and he does not misconceive one who sees.<sup>40</sup> This is the taintless mind of an Arahant forever escaped the eye of the *Māra*.

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<sup>39</sup> Norman, **The Elders' Verses (Theragāthā)** (London, 1969), p. 43.

<sup>40</sup> A II 24.

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