

As you act, by that you are reborn

Source: **Kukkura,vatika Sutta**, the Discourse on the Dog-vow Ascetics (M 57, SD 23.11) translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2008, 2026.¹

1.1 ATTACHMENT TO RITUALS AND VOWS

1.1.0 The Kukkura,vatika Sutta (M 57) is a humorous discourse on “animal piety” (the notion that behaving like a dog or a cow is religious) with a serious note that we tend to become how we behave. The two proponents of the discourse are the young Koliya, **Puṇṇa**, a cow-vow ascetic (wearing horns and a tail),² and the naked ascetic [acelaka], **Seṇiya**, a dog-vow ascetic (behaving in a dog-like manner).³

There is another well known case of dog asceticism, that of the naked ascetic [acela] Kora-k,khattiya the dog-ascetic, recorded in **the Pāṭika Sutta** (D 24). The faithless Sunakkhatta, erstwhile monk and an attendant of the Buddha, disappointed by his notion that the Buddha could not perform miracles, switches his allegiance to the dog-ascetic, Kora-k,khattiya, regarding him as an arhat. Despite the Buddha’s admonitions, he remains stuck in his false views.⁴

The Kukkura,vatika Sutta (M 57) and the Pāṭika Sutta (D 24) centre around “clinging to rituals and vows” (*sīla-b, bat’upādāna* or *sīla-b.bata, parāmāsa*). Here *sīla* can mean “conduct, nature,” as in the common phrase, “by this ritual or vow or asceticism or holy life, I will become a god or some lesser god” (*iminā ‘haṃ sīlena vā vatena vā tapenā vā brahmacariyena vā devo vā bhavissāmi dev’aññataro vā*).⁵

Here “ritual” refers to a *ritualistic* way of keeping the precepts or making our practice merely as a routine, “observance.” By *vata* is meant some kind of vow, aspiration, prayer, etc, that we do not or cannot really put into practice, or which is not really beneficial.⁶ **The Dhamma,saṅgāṇī** says, “Clinging to rituals and vows is the view of recluses and brahmins outside the religion that purification is achieved by rituals and rules” (Dhs §1222). An example of such a view is “the dog ritual, dog vow” (*kukkura,sīla kukkura,vata*) described here in **Kukkura,vatika Sutta** (M 57).⁷

1.1.1 The ascetics’ questions

The discourse opens with the young Koliya, **Puṇṇa**, a cow-vow ascetic and the naked ascetic [acelaka], **Seṇiya**, a dog-vow ascetic, visiting the Buddha, each asking the Buddha of the other’s destiny or future birth. The Buddha characteristically refuses to answer such questions [§§2, 4], as they would be rather negative and troubling.⁸

An interesting situation of the two bestial ascetics is that one is inquiring about the other’s destiny. Neither the text nor its commentary explains this, except to give us the impression that both of them are very devoted, each to their own practice.

¹ <http://www.themindingcentre.org/dharmafarer/wp-content/uploads/23.11-Kukkuravatika-S-m57-piya.pdf>

² Comy says that he wore horns on his head, tied a tail behind him, and went about eating grass with the cows (MA 3:100).

³ Comy says that he exhibited all the actions typical of a dog, and the both of them were play-mates (*saha,paṃ-sakīlikā sahayakā*) (MA 3:100).

⁴ D 24,1.7-10/3:6-9 @ SD 63.4.

⁵ See eg **Ceto,khila S**, M 16,12/1:102 @ SD 51.4.

⁶ See **Iṭṭha S** (A 5.43/3:47-49), SD 47.2.

⁷ M 57,2/1:387 @ SD 23.11. Cf S:B 726 n5. See **Emotional independence**, SD 40a.8 (5).

⁸ In cases where the question is “unanswerable” (*avyākata*) or not related to spiritual development, he would remain silent, ie not answer them at all, as in **Cūḷa Māluṅkya,putta S** (M 63), SD 5.8 (2), & **Aggi Vaccha,gotta S** (M 72), SD 6.15: see Intro, esp (2).

Puṇṇa questions the Buddha first, asking about Seniya's dog asceticism, stating that he “is one who does what is hard to do. He eats his food when it is thrown to the ground. He has for a long time fully observed the dog vow” [§2bcd]. After being pressed thrice, the Buddha answers that if one regularly and completely behaves like a dog, *he would be reborn as a dog*, or reborn in hell or in the animal realm if he has wrong view! [§3]. Seniya weeps with remorse at his own fate [§4].

Seniya then asks the Buddha about Puṇṇa's cow asceticism, the Buddha, as before, thrice hesitates to answer [§4.2-5]. Finally, the Buddha replies that if Puṇṇa persists in his cow asceticism, *he would be reborn as a cow*, or reborn in hell or in the animal realm if he has wrong view! [§5]. Puṇṇa, too, weeps with remorse at his own fate [§6].

1.1.2 The ascetics' remorse and realization

In both cases, the Buddha explains that *a false ascetic practice has less severe consequences when it is undertaken without wrong view than when it is accompanied by wrong view* [§§3, 5]. **Bodhi** here remarks that “[a]lthough few nowadays will take up the dog-duty practice, many other deviant lifestyles have become widespread, and to the extent that these are justified by a wrong view, their consequences become that much more harmful” (M:ÑB 1260 n601).

Both the ascetics, after realizing their ill-fated posthumous destinies weep, “not because the Blessed One spoke thus to me,” but that their false asceticism “has been fully observed for a long time” [§§4.2, 6.2]. Apparently, this means that they are not upset at the Buddha has said, but realize, after all, that the bestial conduct not only has no religious merit, but would bring them future pain.

Puṇṇa then declares his faith in the Buddha and that both of them would like to abandon their wrong practices [§6.3]. The Buddha admonishes them on the 4 types of karma [§7-11] [2]. At the end of the teaching, Puṇṇa takes refuge [§12], Seniya joins the order, and in due course becomes an arhat [§13-15].

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