7

Makkaṭa Sutta
The Discourse on the Monkey | S 47.7
Theme: The meditative mind keeps Māra away
Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2013

1 Sutta highlights

1.1 A CALL TO MEDITATION. The Makkaṭa Sutta (S 47.7) is a short discourse calling us to keep up our meditation practice and a life of mindfulness so that Māra [1.4] does not hold us captive. The meditation here is satipatthana (sati’paṭṭhāna) or the focuses of mindfulness [§§11-13].

The Sutta opens with the parable of the foolish Himalayan monkey [§§3-6], who is caught in a trap and killed by the trapper. The foolish monkey represents an unmindful monk or person who does not meditate or is unmindful [1.2]. The wrong pasture for the monks and meditators here is defined as the pleasurable aspects of sense-experiences by which we are distracted by so that we lose mental focus and clarity [§9].

The wise monkeys keep to their pasture, the habitual and safe places for foraging. The true practitioner keeps to this pasture, too, that is, his practice of meditation and mindfulness [1.3]. Keeping to the right pasture here refers to the practice of the 4 focuses of mindfulness [§12].

1.2 THE MONKEY PARABLE

1.2.1 The terrains. The monkey parable here has 2 aspects or similes, that is, the terrains and the monkeys [§§4-6]. The Sutta instruction opens with “rough and rugged tracts” in the Himalayas “where neither monkeys nor humans go” [§3]. This figure represents nirvana.

Then, there are the rough and rugged tracts inhabited only by the monkeys, who are apparently safe from the humans. This seems to represent the saints except for the arhats (who have attained nirvana). The saints are all assured of awakening in a matter of time, and as such face no danger from Māra, representing the dangers of being distracted by sensual pleasures.

The most dangerous terrains are those inhabited by both monkeys and humans. The humans, however, trap and kill the monkeys. The wise monkeys know this and keep away from the traps set by the humans. The foolish and playful monkey however gets caught in the trap [1.2.2]. This represents wordliness.

1.2.2 The monkeys. The oldest Pali dictionary, the Abhidhāna-paṭipākā, lists these 5 words for “monkey”: makkaṭo vānaro sākhā.migo kapi valīmukho (Abhdp 614). Three of these words are well known in monkey parables and similes in the suttas, and they all have to do with the mind, usually its more difficult aspects. Here are the best known figurative references to the monkey in the suttas:

- Assutava Sutta 1
  - Sutta: S 12.61/2:95
  - Phrase: swinging from tree to tree
  - Meaning: the mind’s need for an object

- Makkaṭa Sutta
  - Sutta: S 47.7/5:148
  - Phrase: caught in a birdlime trap
  - Meaning: lack of meditation and mindfulness

- Taṇhā Vagga
  - Dharmapīla Dh 334
  - Phrase: monkey seeking fruits in trees
  - Meaning: heedlessly after sensual pleasures

- Suddh’āṭṭhaka Sutta
  - Sutta: Sn 791
  - Phrase: seizing and releasing branches
  - Meaning: the power of lust over our minds

---

1 A Pali dictionary of synonyms, attr to the 12th-cent Sinhala scholar-monk Moggallāna, which in style and method, is similar to the Sanskrit lexicon, Amara,kośa.

2 For further details, see CPD: kapi.
In the first two suttas, that is, S 12.61 and our Sutta (S 47.7), the word for “monkey” is makkhaṭa (Skt markaṭa); in Dh 334, it is vānara (literally “forester,” from vana, “forest”), while in Sn 791, it is kapi. We find this last word used in such compounds as kapi,citta (“monkey mind”) meaning “capricious, fickle” (J 3:148,14* = 525,25*) and kapi,niddā (“monkey-sleep”) meaning “(taking) a nap, dozing” (Miln 300,23 + 31).

In the Makkhaṭa Sutta (S 47.7), the monkeys represent humans, of which there are the wise and the foolish. The wiser monkeys are wary of the trap and keep away §§5.2, while the foolish and playful ones find all their 5 limbs (2 paws, 2 legs and his head) caught in traps §§5.3-4, and are then killed by the hunter §6.2. The monkey’s 5 limbs represent our 5 senses, through which, if we are unmindful, Māra gains access to our minds and takes control over our lives. However, both the wise and the foolish monkeys inhabit the same terrain [1.3].

1.3 Pasture and field

1.3.1 Terrains. The 3 kinds of terrain, all found in the Himalayas, are mentioned in the Sutta:

§3    inaccessible and hostile “rough and rugged tracts” where neither monkeys nor humans inhabit;
§4.1 “rough and rugged tracts” where only monkeys inhabit; and
§4.2 “level, delightful terrains,” where both monkeys and humans have access.

The 3rd terrain clearly represents our own world, where we rely on our senses, and as such, can easily become dependent on them and be distracted by sensual pleasures, represented by the hunter’s trap, and the hunter himself is Māra the bad one.

1.3.2 “The field of others.” The Sutta commentary here is silent on “field of others” or “the far range” (para,visaya), but elsewhere, the Commentaries gloss it (para,visaya) in different ways, thus:

(1) as “the 5 cords of sense-pleasures” (pañca kāma,guṇa) (DA 3:847, on the Cakka,vatti Siha,nāda Sutta, D 26), which in turn quotes 3 the Sakun’agghi Sutta (S 47.6), 4 which is in turn identical with §9 of our Sutta here;
(2) as “the enemy” (sattu,visaya, NmA 2:453), clearly an allusion to Māra the bad one; and
(3) as the “preta realm” (peta,visaya, PvA 268).

Para,visaya, “the field of others” or “the far range” is a very interesting expression. From its context in the Sutta and commentarial glosses, we can say that it refers an over-dependence on sense-experiences, especially being attracted to sensual pleasures and distracted by perception of pain and displeasure. In other words, we tend to become an emotionally reactive person.

Our mindfulness training here is to understand the true nature of the senses—that they are conditioned and impermanent—and not to be attached to them, not to view them as being more than what they really are but to see them as they arise and pass away in the light of true reality. In the true light of impermanence, we begin to understand that we only have a breath’s moment to show our kindness to others before they move on. We gladly enjoy what is the good, knowing that they will soon pass away; we joyfully bear the bad knowing it too in time will pass away.

---

3 D 26.1.3/3:58 @ SD 36.10.
4 S 47.6,10/5:147 @ SD 81.2.
1.3.3 “The haunt of our ancestors.” Here, the Buddha is adapting brahminical language, referring to the 4 focuses of mindfulness (satipaṭṭhāna) as “the haunt of our ancestors” (pettika, visaya), admonishing us, “Do not stray away from the focuses of mindfulness, the way of the Buddhas.” If we are looking for true happiness and spiritual liberation, this is the tried and tested path, the sure and only way to awakening, that is, the noble eightfold path.

Pettika means “departed ones,” but here rendered as “ancestors” or “the fathers,” as it refers to the past buddhas. The Digha Commentary (DA 3:847) quotes Sakun'āgghi Sutta (§ 47.6), on the fable of how a quail who strays from her customary terrain can be caught by a hawk, but not so if she does not. While at the foot of a mountain, there are many ways to ascend the slopes, once we head for the peak, there is only one sure and safe way up to it.

1.4 Māra is the early Buddhist personification of bad. He is at the very core of the Buddhist mythology of evil or badness from the earliest times—he appears, for example, in the Padhāna Sutta (Sn 3.2) to the Commentarial period. His importance is attested by the stock phrase: “This universe, with the devas, Māras and Brahmas, recluses and brahmins” (eg M 3:60; Sn 4:24).

Here, in the Makkaṭa Sutta, Māra is the personification of the beguiling and destructive powers of the cords of sensual pleasures [§9]. This is another way of saying that sensual pleasures are the greatest distraction and hindrance to good meditation and to being good in general. Hence, Māra should be understood and overcome.

The best way to do this is by attaining dhyana, by which we fully, even if temporarily, transcend the powers of physical pleasures. However, when we direct our wisdom rooted in such a calm and clear mind, it will liberate us permanently from Māra, that is, we will awaken. Otherwise, we need to be uncompromisingly mindful and diligent in our moral lives and spiritual growth, so as not to fall into any of Māra’s numerous traps.

2 A difficult passage [§6.2]

2.1 Section 6.2 is a difficult passage, but there are enough clues from the various textual readings for us to reconstruct it so that we have a good idea of its import. Let us first examine the various readings we have from the ancient textual manuscripts.

The Siamese (Thai) reading is Tam enam bhikkhave, luddo vijjhitvā [Ce jhatvā] tasmīṁ yeva makkaṭaṁ uddharitvā aviṣajjhetvā* yena kāmam pakkamati. We can translate this version as follows:

Then, bhikshus, the hunter, having pierced (vijjhitvā) him [the monkey], having removed (uddharitvā) him right there (from the trap), having made sure he is not set free (that is, secured), goes on his way as he pleases.

The Sinhalese version has “destroyed, killed” (jhatvā) instead of vijjhitvā. Although it is possible to render jhatvā as “having burned,” it would not fit the context here. So from the Sinhalese and the Siamese texts, we could read it as that the hunter kills the monkey and then takes its carcass along with him.

---

5 S 47.6/5:146 f @ SD 81.2; see also Sakun'āgghi J (J 168/2:58 f); cf Miln 367 f.
6 On the significant difference between “bad” and “evil,” see Beyond good and evil, SD SD 18.7 esp (4.4.5).
7 Sn 3.2/425-449/74-78.
8 See Māra, SD 61.8.
9 See SD 31.7 (1.6.2) A pleasure beyond the body.
10 Jhatvā, ger of jhāpeti (caus of jhāyati, to burn; destroy; bring to ruin; kill” PED).
The Burmese (Myanmar) and European (Pali Text Society) editions have this variant, “without loosening him, left him on that very same piece of wood” (tasmim yeva kattha, kat’āṅgāre avissajjetvā)—which we follow above. The European (PTS) version, instead of avissajvetvā reads avassajjetvā (“to let loose, to give up,” CPD), but it would be difficult to understand why the hunter would set the monkey free after having trapped it.

2.2 Kaṭṭha, Kat’āṅgāra. Here, the Sinhalese variant is tasmim yeva makkaṭaṁ uddharitată ācajjetvā, which is difficult to interpret as the word ācajjetvā is not found in any dictionary. It possibly means “having given away, abandoned (it)” (from cajati, DP). The idea then is that having extricated the trapped monkey, the hunter then gives him away.

The best reading we have of this is Tam enaṁ bhikkhave, luddo vijjhitvā tasmim yeva kaṭṭha, kat’āṅgāre avissajjetvā... (which we follow in our translation here). However, the phrase kaṭṭha, kat’āṅgāra is problematic. By itself, kaṭṭha means “wood; a piece of wood, a stick, a twig; especially wood used as fuel, kindling, firewood” (DP). The same dictionary and the CPD define kaṭṭh’āṅga as: (1) “(mfn) with parts or branches of dry (dead?) wood”; (2) a kind of tree (Skt kṛṣṇaka) (CPD), (3) (Cf Skt kṛṣāṅga) having thin branches (? (CPD). The word ‘kaṭṭha (CPD) and kaṭṭhaka (DP) mean “bamboo (= velu). Aṅgāra means “charcoal; heated charcoal, embers.” (This would give us the impression that the hunter roasted the monkey meat over such a fire.)

In fact, the CPD, under kaṭṭhakataṅgāra (S 5:149,2) says that it is a “problematic reading of uncertain meaning.” In its Remarks, adds: “the sentence in which ~ occurs would seem to be corrupt; the vl kaṭṭhām uddharetvā makes it impossible to construe the loc tasmim; the same consideration applies to the reading makkaṭaṁ uddharitvā (a modern conjecture?).”

2.3 Pāsādiκ’s Proposals. However, Bhikkhu Pāsādiκ, in his review (1997) of Sanskrit-Wörterbuch der buddhistischen Texte aus den Turfan-Funden [SWTF], points out that this dictionary has an entry kāsthakaṇḍambara (SWTF 2:74), which corresponds to Pali kaṭṭhaṅgāra. As such, he suggests amending the reading to kaṭṭha, kāloṅgare āvaṭjjetvā, which he renders as “having fastened [the monkey] just to that wooden staff.”

Pāsādiκ translates the Chinese sentence, 猎師既至，即以杖貫，擔負而去 lièshī jì zhì, jí yǐ zhàngguàn, dānfù ér qù (T2.173b28-29), as follows: “Hardly has the hunter arrived when he takes the staff, fastens [the monkey] to it and goes away, carrying [the load] on his shoulder” (1997:191 f).

However, it is clear here that tasmim yeva refers to “the wood (block)” (kāloṅgara), that is, the trap that the hunter has set earlier. “Staff” probably comes from the Chinese parallel, where we have 枝 zhǒng. The verb āvaṭjjetvā, as noted by Bodhi, cannot mean “having fastened” (as the monkey is already stuck to the wood-trap).

Putting all this together, we can try to reconstruct the passage as follows:

---

11 Critical Pali Dictionary by V Trenckner et al.
12 A Dictionary of Pali by M Cone.
13 CPD 4:46b has 2 entries on kaṭṭh-’āṅga.
14 This correspondence is confirmed by Udāna, varga (Uv 1.35) and Dh 41, referred to in Edgerton’s BHSD (p165: kāloṅgara. Related intermediate forms can be found in Dh:G 153, kāḍiṅgara, and Dh:P 19.8 (Patna), katiṅgara
15 Referred to at Sanskrithandschriften aus den Turfanfunden: SHT 4:106 n22.
16 See S:B 1919 n133 where Bodhi accepts this amendment of kāṭaṅgare to kāloṅgare, but rejects the idea that it should be tr as “staff,” as this is unattested and also does not fit the context here. For some inexplicable reason, in all his variant readings here and all his translations, Bodhi has routinely omitted any reference to the Siamese Tipiṭaka.
6.2 Then the hunter, having speared [pierced] him, without loosening\textsuperscript{17} him, left it on that very same piece of wood,\textsuperscript{18} and departs to where he pleases.

---

\textbf{Makkaṭa Sutta}

\textbf{The Discourse on the Monkey}

\textsuperscript{S 47.7}

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{1} At Sāvatthī.
  \item \textsuperscript{2} There the Blessed One addressed the monks, “Bhikshus!”
  \begin{itemize}
    \item \textsuperscript{“Bhante!” the monks replied to the Blessed One in assent.}
  \end{itemize}
  \begin{itemize}
    \item \textsuperscript{The Blessed One said this:}\textsuperscript{19}
  \end{itemize}

\end{itemize}

\textbf{The monkey-trapper}

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{3} There are, bhikshus, in the Himalayas, the king of mountains, rough and rugged tracts, \textit{where neither monkeys nor humans go.}\textsuperscript{20}
  \item \textsuperscript{4} There are, bhikshus, in the Himalayas, the king of mountains, rough and rugged tracts, \textit{where monkeys go but not humans.}
  \item \textsuperscript{4.2} There are, bhikshus, in the Himalayas, the king of mountains, \textit{level, delightful terrains, where both monkeys and humans go.}
  \item \textsuperscript{5} There, bhikshus, \textit{along the monkey trails, hunters set a trap of birdlime\textsuperscript{21} to trap the monkeys.}\textsuperscript{22}
  \item \textsuperscript{5.2} There, bhikshus, monkeys that are \textit{neither foolish nor playful,} seeing that trap, would stay away.\textsuperscript{23}
  \item \textsuperscript{5.3} But there is a monkey that is \textit{foolish and playful,} who, seeing the trap, would approach it and grasp it with his \textit{hand.}
  \item \textsuperscript{5.4} It gets stuck there.
  \begin{itemize}
    \item Thinking, “I’ll free my \textit{paw!}” he grasps it with his second paw, but it sticks there, too.
    \item Thinking, “I’ll free \textit{both} my paws!” he grasps them with his foot, but it sticks there, too.
    \item Thinking, “I’ll free both my \textit{paws and feet!} he grasps them with his second foot, but it sticks there, too.
    \item Thinking, “I’ll free both my \textit{paws and both my feet!}” he grasps them with his \textit{snout,\textsuperscript{24} but it sticks there, too.}
  \end{itemize}
\end{itemize}

\textsuperscript{17} Be Ee Se \textit{avassijjetvā}, neg abs of \textit{vissajjeti: “not giving away or transferred”} (CPD: a-vissajitvā).
\textsuperscript{18} The piece of wood that is the trap.
\textsuperscript{19} This parenthesis is supplied by S 47.5/5:145,24, inserted here to give us the historical context of S 47.7.
\textsuperscript{20} \textit{Atthi bhikkhave himavato pabbata,rājassa duggā visamā desā, yattha n’eva makkaṭānaṁ cārī na manussānā.}
\textsuperscript{21} \textit{Lepa,} prob some sort of bird-lime or gum. Comy says it is made from the sap of an India fig tree and so on (\textit{vaṭa,rukkha,khirādīhi,} SA 3:201). Prob this included pitch and tar, too. See Steven G Platt et al, \textit{Birdlime in Western Myanmar}, 2012.
\textsuperscript{22} \textit{Tatra bhikkhave, luddā makkaṭa,vīthisu lepam odḍenti makkaṭānaṁ bādhanāya.}
\textsuperscript{23} \textit{Tatra bhikkhave, ye te makkaṭā abālo,jātikā [Ce jātiya throughout] alalo,jātikā te taṁ lepam disvā ārakā pari-vajjenti [Be paricajjanti].
Thus, bhikshus, a monkey lies trapped by five points and howls.\footnote{Tuṇḍa, “(of a bird) beak, (of an animal) snout, muzzle (part of an animal covering its mouth and nose); point (of an arrow).”}

He has fallen into misfortune, fallen into ruin, for the hunter set to work as he likes with him.\footnote{Evam hi so bhikkhave, makkaṭo pañc’uddito thanaṁ [Be Se pañc’uddito thunaṁ] seti.}

Then, the hunter, having speared [pierced] him, without loosening\footnote{Be Ee Se avassijjētā, neg abs of vissajjēti: “not giving away or transferred” (CPD: a-vissajjīvā)} him, left it on that very same piece of wood,\footnote{The piece of wood that is the trap.} and departs to where he pleases.\footnote{Se Tam enaṁ bhikkhave, luddo vijjhitvā [Ce jhatvā] tasmin yeva makkāṭaṁ uddharitvā avissajjetvā* yena kāmaṁ pakkamati. *Be Ee tasmin yeva kaṭṭha, kat’aṅgāre avissajjetvā [Ee avassajjētā]; Ce tasmin yeva makkatam uddharitattā ācajjetvā (?). See Intro (2).}

Even so, bhikshus, it is with one who wanders in the wrong pasture, in the field of others.\footnote{Evaṁ hi taṁ bhikkhave, hoti yo agacaro carati para, visaye. See Intro (1.3).}

**Wrong pasture**

Therefore, bhikshus, do not wander in the wrong pasture, in the field of others. Bhikshus, when you wander in the wrong pasture, in the field of others, Māra will gain access (into your mind), will get you as an object of his consciousness.\footnote{Agocare bhikkhave, caratāṁ para, visaye lacchati māro otāram, lacchati māro ārammaṇāṁ. Lacchati is fut of labhati, “he gets, gains, obtains.”}

Avoiding Māra’s hold

And what, bhikshus, is the wrong pasture, the field of others, that is to say the 5 cords of sense-pleasures? What are the five?\footnote{The foll is a well known stock, esp in Saḷāyana Vagga (S ch 4).}

1. **Forms** cognized by the eye that are desirable, agreeable, pleasurable, lovable, connected with sensual desire, arousing lust;
2. **Sounds** cognized by the ear that are desirable, agreeable, pleasurable, lovable, connected with sensual desire, arousing lust;
3. **Smells** cognized by the nose that are desirable, agreeable, pleasurable, lovable, connected with sensual desire, arousing lust;
4. **Tastes** cognized by the tongue that are desirable, agreeable, pleasurable, lovable, connected with sensual desire, arousing lust;
5. **Touches** cognized by the body that are desirable, agreeable, pleasurable, lovable, connected with sensual desire, arousing lust.

This, bhikshus, is not a monk’s pasture, the field of others.

Keeping to the pasture

Keep to the pasture, bhikshus, the haunt of our ancestors [the field of our own fathers].\footnote{Agocare bhikkhave, caratāṁ para, visaye lacchati māro otāram, lacchati māro ārammaṇaṁ. Lacchati is fut of labhati, “he gets, gains, obtains.”}

When you keep to your pastures, the haunt of our ancestors, Māra will not gain access (into your mind), will not get you as an object of his consciousness.\footnote{The foll is a well known stock, esp in Saḷāyana Vagga (S ch 4).}
The 4 focuses of mindfulness

11 And what, bhikshus, is a monk’s pasture, the haunt of our ancestors, that is to say the 4 focuses of mindfulness? What are the four?

12 Here, bhikshus,

(1) a monk\(^3\) dwells \(^3\) exertive, clearly aware, mindful, observing [watching] the body in the body,\(^3\)

removing\(^4\) covetousness and displeasure\(^5\) in the world;

(2) he dwells exertive, clearly aware, mindful, observing feelings in the feelings, removing covetousness and displeasure in the world;

(3) he dwells exertive, clearly aware, mindful, observing the mind in the mind, removing covetousness and displeasure in the world;

(4) he dwells exertive, clearly aware, mindful, observing dharmas in the dharmas, removing covetousness and displeasure in the world.

13 This, bhikshus, is the monk’s pasture, the haunt of our ancestors.

— evam —

130114 130116 130329 130727 140503 150610 181213

-- end --

--- Footnotes ---

33 See Intro (1.4).

34 “Will not find” (lacchati), fut of labhati (“he gains, finds”).

35 Na lacchati māro otāraṁ, na lacchati māro ārammaṇaṁ. Otāra = BHS avatāra, “descent.” Here, ārammaṇa (canonical sense) means “basis (of consciousness);” in the later comy sense, it mean “meditation object.” See Mak-kāta S (S 47.7.9-10/5:149) & SD 41.7 (1.3.2) for comy.

36 Here “a monk” (bhikkhu) may refer to either an ordained monastic or anyone who is meditating (here, doing satipatthana) (DA 3:756; MA 1:241; VbhA 216 f; cf SnA 251). See SD 13.1 (3.1a).

37 Ātūpī sampajānno satimā, vineyya loke abhijjhā,domanassanā. Here we find 4 of the 5 spiritual faculties (pañc’-indriya) in action: see SD 13.1 (4.2).

38 “Observing the body in the body” (kāye kāyānupassi). See Satipaṭṭhāna S (M 10) @ SD 13.1 (3.4).

39 Vineyya can mean “should remove” (as pot, like vineyya, Sn 590) or as “having removed” (as ger, like vinaitvā, Pm 1:244), and both senses apply in Satipaṭṭhāna S. U Silananda similarly ends the sentence with “removing covetousness and grief in the world” (1990:177); also 1990:22-25. See SD 13.1 (4.2c).
