

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 satipaṭṭhana (*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-p, padīpikā**,¹ lists these 5 words for "monkey": *makkaṭo vānaro sākāhā.migo kapi valīmukho* (Abhdp 614).² 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	S 12.61/2:95	swinging from tree to tree	the mind's need for an object
• Makkaṭa Sutta	S 47.7/5:148	caught in a birdlime trap	lack of meditation and mindfulness
• Taṇhā Vagga	Dh 334	monkey seeking fruits in trees	heedlessly after sensual pleasures
• Suddh'aṭṭhaka S	Sn 791	seizing and releasing branches	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 *makkāṭa* (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 **Makkaṭa 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 Sīha,nāda Sutta**, D 26), which in turn quotes³ 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 Dīgha Commentary (DA 3:847) quotes **Sakuṇ’agghi Sutta** (S 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.⁵ 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.⁶ 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)⁷—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).⁸

Here, in **the Makkāṭṭa Sutta**, Māra is the personification of the beguiling and destructive powers of the cords of sensual pleasures [S9]. 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.⁹ 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 enaṃ bhikkhave, luddo vijjhivā [Ce jhatvā] tasmim̐ yeva makka-ṭaṃ uddharitvā avissajjetvā* yena kāmaṃ pakkamati*. We can translate this version as follows:

Then, bhikkhus, the hunter, having pierced (*vijjhivā*) 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 *vijjhivā*. Although it is possible to render *jhatvā*¹⁰ 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 **Sakuṇ’agghi 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*),² “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” (*tasmim̐ yeva kaṭṭha, kat’āṅgāre avissajjetvā*)—which we follow above. The European (PTS) version, instead of *avissajjetvā* reads *avassajjetvā* (“to let loose, to give up,” CPD),¹¹ 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 *tasmim̐ yeva makkaṭam̐ uddharitatā ācājjētṽ*, which is difficult to interpret as the word *ācājjētṽ* is not found in any dictionary. It possibly means “having given away, abandoned (it)” (from *cajati*, DP).¹² 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 enam̐ bhikkhave, luddo vijjhivā tasmim̐ 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 *kṛṣṇāṅga*) having thin branches (?) (CPD).¹³ The word ¹*kaṭṭha* (CPD) and *kaṭṭhaka* (DP) mean “bamboo (= *velu*). *Āṅgāra* 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 *kaṭṭham̐ uddharetvā* makes it impossible to construe the loc *tasmim̐*; the same consideration applies to the reading *makkaṭam̐ uddharitvā* (a modern conjecture?).”

2.3 PĀSĀDIKO’S PROPOSALS. However, **Bhikkhu Pāsādiko**, in his review (1997) of *Sanskrit-Wörterbuch der buddhistischen Texte aus den Turfan-Funden* [SWTF], points out that this dictionary has an entry *kāṣṭha-kaḍambara* (SWTF 2:74), which corresponds to Pali *kaṭṭhaṅgāra*.¹⁴ As such, he suggests amending the reading to *kaṭṭha, kaliṅgare āvajjetvā*, which he renders as “having fastened [the monkey] just to that wooden staff.”

Pāsādiko translates the Chinese sentence, 獵師既至,即以杖貫,擔負而去 *lièshī jì zhì, jí yǐ zhànguān, dānfù ér qù* (T2.173b28-29),¹⁵ 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).¹⁶

However, it is clear here that *tasmim̐ yeva* refers to “the wood (block)” (*kaliṅgāra*), that is, the trap that the hunter has set earlier. “Staff” probably comes from the Chinese parallel, where we have 杖 *zhàng*. The verb *avajjetvā*, 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 BHS (p165: *kaḍāṅgāra*). Related intermediate forms can be found in Dh:G 153, *kaḍigāra*, and Dh:P 19.8 (Patna), *kaṭim̐gāra*

¹⁵ Referred to at *Sanskrihandschriften aus den Turfanfunden*: SHT 4:106 n22.

¹⁶ See S:B 1919 n133 where Bodhi accepts this amendment of *kataṅgāre* to *kaliṅgāre*, 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 loosening¹⁷ him, left it on that very same piece of wood,¹⁸ and departs to where he pleases.

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Makkaṭa Sutta

The Discourse on the Monkey

S 47.7

[1 At Sāvattḥi.

2 There the Blessed One addressed the monks, “Bhikshus!”
“Bhante!” the monks replied to the Blessed One in assent.
The Blessed One said this:]¹⁹

The monkey-trapper

3 There are, bhikshus, in the Himalayas, the king of mountains, rough and rugged tracts, where neither monkeys nor humans go.²⁰

4 There are, bhikshus, in the Himalayas, the king of mountains, rough and rugged tracts, where monkeys go but not humans.

4.2 There are, bhikshus, in the Himalayas, the king of mountains, level, delightful terrains, where both monkeys and humans go.

5 There, bhikshus, along the monkey trails, hunters set a trap of birdlime²¹ to trap the monkeys.²²

5.2 There, bhikshus, monkeys that are neither foolish nor playful, seeing that trap, would stay away.²³

5.3 But there is a monkey that is foolish and playful, who, seeing the trap, would approach it and grasp it with his *hand*.

5.4 It gets stuck there.

Thinking, “I’ll free my *paw!*” he grasps it with his second paw, but it sticks there, too.

Thinking, “I’ll free *both* my paws!” he grasps them with his foot, but it sticks there, too.

Thinking, “I’ll free both my *paws* and *feet!*” he grasps them with his second foot, but it sticks there, too.

Thinking, “I’ll free both my paws and both my feet!” he grasps them with his *snout*,²⁴ but it sticks there, too.

¹⁷ Be Ee Se *avassijjetvā*, neg abs of *vissajjeti*: “not giving away or transferred” (CPD: a-vissajitvā).

¹⁸ The piece of wood that is the trap.

¹⁹ This parenthesis is supplied by S 47.5/5:145,24, inserted here to give us the historical context of S 47.7.

²⁰ *Atthi bhikkhave himavato pabbata,rājassa duggā visamā desā, yattha n’eva makkaṭānaṃ cārī na manussānaṃ.*

²¹ *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 (*vaṭa,rukka,khīrādīhi*, SA 3:201). Prob this included pitch and tar, too. See Steven G Platt et al, [Birdlime in Western Myanmar](#), 2012.

²² *Tatra bhikkhave, luddā makkaṭa,vīthisu lepaṃ oḍḍenti makkaṭānaṃ bādhanaṃ.*

²³ *Tatra bhikkhave, ye te makkaṭā abāla,jātikā* [Ce jātiya throughout] *alola,jātikā te taṃ lepaṃ disvā ārakā parivajjenti* [Be *paricajjanti*].

6 Thus, bhikshus, a monkey lies trapped by five points and howls.²⁵

He has fallen into misfortune, fallen into ruin, for the hunter set to work as he likes with him. [149]

6.2 Then, the hunter, having speared [pierced] him, without loosening²⁶ him, left it on that very same piece of wood,²⁷ and departs to where he pleases.²⁸

7 Even so, bhikshus, it is with one who wanders in the wrong pasture, in the field of others.²⁹

Wrong pasture

7.2 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.³⁰

Avoiding Māra's hold

8 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?³¹

9 THE 5 AGGREGATES OF CLINGING

(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

10 Keep to the pasture, bhikshus, the haunt of our ancestors [the field of our own fathers].³²

10.2 Bhikshus, when you keep to your pastures, the haunt of our ancestors, Māra³³ will *not* gain access (into your mind),³⁴ will not get you as an object of his consciousness.³⁵

²⁴ *Tuṇḍa*, "(of a bird) beak, (of an animal) snout, muzzle (part of an animal covering its mouth and nose); point (of an arrow)."

²⁵ *Evaṃ hi so bhikkhave, makkaṭo pañc'uddito thanaṃ* [Be Se *pañcôḍḍito thunam*] *seti*.

²⁶ Be Ee Se *avassijjetvā*, neg abs of *vissajjeti*: "not giving away or transferred" (CPD: a-vissajitvā)

²⁷ The piece of wood that is the trap.

²⁸ *Se Tam enaṃ bhikkhave, luddo vijjhivā* [Ce *jhatvā*] *tasmim̐ yeva makkaṭaṃ uddharitvā avissajjetvā** *yena kāmaṃ pakkamati*. *Be Ee *tasmim̐ yeva kaṭṭha, kat'aṅgāre avissajjetvā* [Ee *avassajjetvā*]; Ce *tasmim̐ yeva makkaṭaṃ uddharitatā ācājjetvā* (?). See Intro (2).

²⁹ *Evaṃ hi taṃ* [Be Se *h'etaṃ*] *bhikkhave, hoti yo agocaro carati para,visaye*. See Intro (1.3).

³⁰ *Agocare bhikkhave, carataṃ para,visaye lacchati māro otāraṃ, lacchati māro ārammaṇaṃ*. *Lacchati* is fut of *labhati*, "he gets, gains, obtains."

³¹ The foll is a well known stock, esp in **Saḷāyatana Vagga** (S ch 4).

³² *Gocare bhikkhave, caratha sake pettike visaye*. See (1.3.3).

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 monk³⁶ dwells³⁷ exertive, clearly aware, mindful,
observing [watching] the body in the body,³⁸
removing³⁹ covetousness and displeasure⁴⁰ in the world;⁴¹
- (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.

— evaṃ —

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³³ See Intro (1.4).

³⁴ "Will not find" (*lacchati*), fut of *labhati* ("he gains, finds").

³⁵ *Na lacchati māro otāraṃ, na lacchati māro ārammaṇaṃ*. *Otāra* = BHS *avatāra*, "descent." Here, *ārammaṇa* (canonical sense) means "basis (of consciousness)"; in the later comy sense, it mean "meditation object." See **Mak-kaṭṭa 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 satipaṭṭhana) (DA 3:756; MA 1:241; VbhA 216 f; cf SnA 251). See SD 13.1 (3.1a).

³⁷ *Ātāpī sampajāno satimā, vineyya loke abhijjhā, domanassaṃ*. 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 kāyānupassī*). 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).

⁴⁰ "Covetousness and displeasure," *abhijjhā, domanassaṃ*, alt trs: "desire and discontent," "desiring and disliking," or "longing and loathing." Walshe (1995:335 & n632) renders it as "hankering and fretting [for the world]." See SD 13.1 (4.2).

⁴¹ "World" (*loka*). See SD 13.1 (4.2d).