

SD 64.5

Chavālāta Sutta

The Discourse on the Cremation Firebrand

A 4.95

Theme: One who benefits both oneself and others is the foremost

Translated and annotated by Piya Tan 2009, ©2026

1 Sutta summary and significance

1.1 SUTTA SUMMARY

One who follows teachings or religion neither for one's own good nor for the good of others is like a **funeral firebrand** that *burns at both ends and is smeared with (cow)dung in the middle*. Better is a person who practises for others' welfare but not for one's own good. Better still is the third person, one who practises for one's own welfare but not for the good of others.

And the best of them is one who practises both for one's own welfare and for the welfare of others.

Just as of the 5 cow products—*milk, curd, butter, ghee and cream of ghee*—the last is the best, so is the one who practises for the good of both oneself and for others.

1.2 "FOR ONE'S OWN GOOD" AND "FOR THE GOOD OF OTHERS"

1.2.1 For one's own good

To practise "**for one's own good**" (*atta,hita*) is to understand that evil or good depends on one's own intentions (the mind), especially when expressed in bodily action and speech. Further, one's actions—whether in thought, deed or word—have karmic consequences; we tend to form habits of them and these habits will act on us with similar effects.

Self-reliance means that we are able to know evil and good, and how each actually affects us. Having known so, we must be willing to end and avoid evil, initiate and cultivate good. With this will, we purify the mind, where we can confront the roots of karma decisively. (Dh 183)

Our mind will then be at peace, and we will be happy; we will then grow as a person and in wisdom. When this wisdom is rooted in understanding **impermanence**, we have greater insight into true reality, which is the basis of **self-awakening**.

1.2.2 For the good of others

1.2.2.1 To practise "**for the good of others**" (*para,hita*) begins with the understanding that even when we value or need privacy or solitude (at some points in our lives), the reality is that we cannot live isolated lives. Privacy and solitude are possible mainly because there are other people that have worked and are working to make our community and society possible and wholesome. It means we are aware of others, and that we share very much the same human values of life, having, freedom, truth and peace.

The way we are right now, as highly evolved humans, is the result of long ages of social evolution by way of communication, interaction and cooperation. Thus, to practise for the good of others means that we habitually maintain **a mind of unconditional acceptance of humanity**, that is, the view and desire that humans can better themselves—that we can better ourselves—and best do so with togetherness and community.

1.2.2.2 Practising for the good of others means that we **respect life**, especially human life. Life should be worthwhile and wholesome; it should have **happiness**, basically by working, having and using

things, and sharing our wealth for the common good. Further, we need **freedom** to truly enjoy life and things. The most basic freedom is that of the person, which should not be violated in any way.

For all these values to work, they must be rooted in **truth**, which makes life, happiness, freedom, truth and peace possible. All these values can best benefit us by giving us the environment for personal and mental development, that is, **a mind** of truth and beauty.¹

Truth means that *love* as feeling and love as action (caring or *compassion*) come from such value-based living; beauty means that with love and caring there arise *joy* and *peace*. With these wonderful qualities, we enjoy heavenly happiness here and now, benefitting both self and others.²

2 Chavâlāta

2.1 DERIVATION, MEANING AND USAGE

2.1.1 The word **chavâlāta** or *chav'ālāta* (Skt *śavâlāta*) derives from *chava*, “corpse, carcase” + *ālāta* [*ālā-ta*], “firebrand or kindling for the funeral pyre” (*susāne alātaṃ*, AA 3:116,26). **The Chavâlāta Sutta** (A 4.95) describes **the funeral firebrand** as “blazing at both ends and smeared with (cow)dung in the middle (*ubhato padittam majjhe gūtha,gatam*): it cannot serve as wood in the village, it cannot serve as wood in the forest” [§2].

2.1.2 Explanations of the word *chavâlāta*

2.1.2.1 The Jīvika Sutta (It 90) of the Iti,vuttaka explains **chavâlāta** as follows:

“it means it is being destroyed,” **chavâlātaṃ va vinassati** (It 90,11*), that is, referring to a person or situation where there is neither personal nor spiritual benefit at all. [2.2.3]

2.1.2.2 The Subhūti Apadāna (Ap 3.21) explains the term as referring to a situation that lacks any benefit, thus:

“it is like wood unsuitable for any task” (**chavâlātaṃ yathā kaṭṭham na kvaci kicca,kārakam**).
(Ap 3.21.9 f/67,19)

2.1.2.3 The metaphor of the cremation fire-brand is used by the Buddha in **the Piṇḍolya Sutta** (S 22.80,19.2). Its Commentary explains that **chavâlāta** means:

“a firebrand for starting a funeral pyre,” **chavâlātan ti chavanam daḍḍh'aṭṭhan alātaṃ**
(SA 2:302,21). [2.2.2.2]

2.1.2.4 The Visuddhi,magga explanation hints at the lack of both personal and spiritual benefits, thus:

“a funeral firebrand is like what is deprived of both ends” (**chavâlataṃ iva ubhato paribāhiro**).
(Vism 1.154/54,12) [2.2.5]

2.1.3 The cremation firebrand [§§5+8] is a well-known Buddhist metaphor [§2].³ There is a discourse named after it, that is, **the Chavâlāta Sutta** (A 4.95), which states that a person who is bent on neither one's own benefit nor the benefit of others is like *a cremation firebrand, burning on both ends, and with dung smeared in between*. [1.1]

¹ On the 5 precepts and 5 values (*pañca,sīla pañca,dhamma*), see SD 1.5 (2).

² On truth and beauty, see SD 40a.1 (8.1.2); SD 10.16 (3.5.5).

³ The metaphor recurs in **Piṇḍolya S** (S 22.80,19.2/3:93,16), SD 28.9a, **Jīvika S** (It 90), **Ubhato,bhaṭṭha J** (J 139/-1:482) and Vism 54, 299. [2.2]

2.2 OCCURRENCES OF THE FIREBRAND METAPHOR

The funeral firebrand metaphor recurs in a number of suttas and texts, illustrating various negative conditions where the person *loses both ways*, that is, benefits neither oneself nor others.

2.2.1 Chavālāta Sutta (A 4.95) and its reprises

2.2.1.1 The Chavālāta Sutta, applying the funeral firebrand metaphor, says:

Suppose, bhikshus, **a cremation firebrand**⁴ is blazing at both ends and smeared with dung in the middle: it cannot serve as wood in the village, it cannot serve as wood in the forest.

In the same way, I say, bhikshus, is the person who is practising neither for one's own welfare nor for the welfare of others. (A 4.95,2/2:95,16-20), SD 64.5

2.2.1.2 The Commentary explains

“It cannot serve as wood in the village” (*n’eva gāme kaṭṭh’attham pharatī ti*) means that one is unable to use the wood in the village, that is, for the purpose of *making rafters, roof beams, pillars, stairs, etc.* due to its unsuitability. Further, “it cannot serve as wood in the forest” (*na araññe*) for *making a field marker, a hut, a bed leg, or couch legs*, due to its unsuitability. One either burns one's hand touching it at either end, or soils one's hand with excrement by grasping the middle.”

(AA 3:117,2-7)

2.2.2 Reprises of the cremation firebrand parable

2.2.2.1 The Piṇḍolya Sutta (S 22.80) too records the Buddha as addressing not immoral monks, those who has renounced the world but do not keep to the training in the Dharma-Vinaya, but refer to totally virtuous renunciants and followers who are lazy (*alasa*) and as such are destroyed by such faults as covetousness, etc:

Bhikshus, just as **a firebrand for a funeral pyre**, lit on both ends, and smeared with dung in the middle, cannot be used as wood in the village nor in the forest,

in just the same way, bhikshus, do I speak of this person—he has abandoned his household wealth, and yet does not fulfill the purpose of asceticism.

(S 22.80,19.2/3:93,16), SD 28.9a; SA 2:302

2.2.2.2 Like **the Piṇḍolya Sutta** (S 22.80) [2.2.2.1], **the Jīvika Sutta** (It 3.5.2/91), too, addresses a person who has gone forth but does not properly live a life of renunciation; one has given up the lay life but has not fulfilled the renunciant's life. §§18.2-19.2 of **S 22.80** form a part of **the Jīvika Sutta** (It 91/3.5.2), along with concluding verses:

In this way, bhikshus, this son of family is one who has gone forth, but⁵
he is covetous, strongly lusting after sense-pleasures,
with a mind of ill will,
with a mind of corrupted intentions,⁶

⁴ *Chavālāta* or *chav’ālāta* [2.1.1].

⁵ The foll 5 qualities describe a mind that badly lacks calm and clarity, and refer, more or less, to the 5 hindrances: (1) sensual desire (*kāma-c, chanda*); (2) ill will (*vyāpāda*); (3) restlessness and worry (*uddhacca, kukkuccha*); (4) sloth and torpor (*thīna, middha*); (5) doubt (*vicikicchā*), see **Nīvaraṇa**, SD 32.1.

muddle-headed, without clear knowing, lacking concentration, scatter-brained, loose in faculty.⁷

Bhikshus, just as **a firebrand of a funeral pyre**,
lit on both ends, and smeared with dung in the middle,
cannot be used as wood in the village nor in the forest,
in just the same way, bhikshus, do I speak of this person—
he has abandoned his household wealth, and yet does not fulfill the purpose of asceticism.

This is the matter [meaning] of what the Blessed One said; concerning which he said thus:

- | | | | |
|----|--|---|----------|
| 8 | Bereft of household goods,
coming to ruin, he is scattered— | he is without wealth in the ascetic's goal, too,
he perishes like a firebrand of the dead. | |
| 9 | Many are the yellow-necks, ⁸
The evil, through evil karma, | evil by nature, unrestrained.
are reborn in the lower realm [hell]. | [Dh 307] |
| 10 | Better to swallow an iron ball,
than for one immoral to feed on | glowing as with fiery tongues of fire,
the country's alms, unrestrained. | [Dh 308] |
- (It 91/3.5.2)

2.2.3 Ubhato,bhaṭṭha Jātaka (J 139)

2.2.3.1 The Buddha related **the Ubhato,bhaṭṭha Jātaka** (J 139) in the bamboo grove about Devadatta. The monks, gathered in the Dharma hall, spoke to one another regarding the metaphor of **a funeral fire-brand**, burning at both ends and smeared with dung in the middle, and hence *serving no use whether in the village or in the forest*. Even though Deva,datta had renounced the world, he neither enjoyed the comforts of lay life nor lived the benefits of renunciation. (J 139/1:482-484)

2.2.3.2 JĀTAKA SUMMARY

Once in a village of line-fishermen one of the men took his tackle and went with his little son to fish. His line snagged but the man, thinking it was a big fish, sent his son home to ask his mother to pick a quarrel with the neighbours to keep them occupied so that they get no share of his catch.

When the boy had gone, the fisherman went into the water to haul the fish, but he struck against the snag and was blinded in both eyes. Further, a robber stole his clothes from the bank and his wife was taken before the village head, fined and beaten for quarrelling.

⁶ “With a mind of corrupted intentions,” *paduṭṭha,mana,saṅkappo*.

⁷ *Abhijjhālu kāmesu tibba,sārāgo, vyāpanna,citto paduṭṭha,mana,saṅkappo, muṭṭha-s,sati asampajāno asamāhi-to vibbhanta,citto pākat’indriyo*. For a longer list of terms describing a deviant monk, see **Jantu S** (S 2.25/1:61), SD 54.13 & its comy: see also S:B 392 n176.

⁸ More fully described in **Dakkhiṇa Vibhaṅga S** (M 142) as “members of the religious lineage who are ‘yellow-necks,’ immoral, of evil nature” (*gotrabhuno kāsāva,kaṇṭhā dussilā pāpa,dhammā*). Its Comy says that “members of the religious lineage” (*gotra,bhuno*) are those monks only in name (M 3:256,7 = Sāra,saṅgaha 25,9). They go about with only a piece of yellow cloth around their necks or arms, and support their wives and children by engaging in trade, farming, etc (MA 5:74 f). They ritually don the saffron robe, and when they remove them, leave the saffron taints on their necks. On *kāsāva,kaṇṭha*, see It 43 (ItA 177); Dh 307a (Dh:P 113, Uv 1.9, *kāsāya,kaṇṭha*; DhA 3:478) qu at V 3:90 (VA 486); AA 1:90,13+24, wr *kāsāva,khaṇḍam*; SnA 162,2, 164,23; Sadda,nīti 78,4, 78,1 *kaṇṭha,-samaṇa*. Does this uncanny premonition refer to the laicized gurus and their followers who claim to be “neither ordained nor lay order members” in our own times? See further M 142,8/3:246 @ SD 1.9 & nn.

The **bodhisattva** who was a tree-sprite saw all this happen and understood its moral. The story was told in reference to **Devadatta**, who is identified with the selfish and foolish fisherman.

2.2.4 Visuddhi,magga (Vism 1.154 + 9.159)

The **Visuddhi,magga** describes an immoral person's loss as being twofold; one has neither the benefits of one's renunciation nor the happiness of the lay life.

2.2.4.1 On account of a lack of moral virtue, one is displeasing to the devas and humans; one is un-instructable by one's fellows in the holy life; one suffers when immorality is censured, and is regretful when the virtuous are praised.

On account of immorality, one is as ugly as hemp cloth. Contact with such a person is painful because those who follow his view meet with long-lasting suffering in states of loss.

One is worthless because no wholesome karmic fruit comes to those who give such a one offerings.

One is difficult to purify, like a cesspit that is years old.

One is like **a funeral firebrand** deprived of both ends (*chavālātam iva ubhato paribāhiro*).

Such a one is outside both ways (those of recluseship and of the lay state).

(Vism 1.154/54)

2.2.4.2 Being a prey of anger, one misconducts oneself in *body, speech and mind*; when the body breaks up after death, one arises in a state of loss.

Just as **a firebrand of a funeral pyre, lit on both ends, and smeared with dung in the middle**; one cannot use it as wood in the village, one cannot use it wood in the forest.

If one is angry now, one does not carry out the Blessed One's teaching. By returning an angry person in kind one will be *worse* than the angry person, and not win the battle hard to win. One will do to one-self the things that help an enemy. One will then be like a funeral firebrand.

(Vism 9.15/299)

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Chavālāta Sutta

The Discourse on the Cremation Firebrand

A 4.95

1 Bhikshus, there are these 4 kinds of persons found in the world.

What are the four?

- | | | |
|-----------------------|-------------------------------|--|
| (1) One who practises | neither for one's own welfare | nor for the welfare of others; ⁹ |
| (2) one who practises | for the welfare of others | but not for one's own welfare; ¹⁰ |
| (3) one who practises | for one's own welfare | but not for the welfare of others; ¹¹ and |
| (4) one who practises | both for one's own welfare | and for the welfare of others. ¹² |

2 Suppose, bhikshus, **a cremation firebrand** is blazing at both ends and smeared with dung in the middle: it cannot serve as wood in the village, it cannot serve as wood¹³ in the forest. [2.1]

3 (1) In the same way, I say, bhikshus, is the person who is practising neither for one's own welfare nor for the welfare of others.

(2) Bhikshus, the person among these who is practising for the welfare of others but not for one's own welfare is the more advanced and more sublime of the [first] two persons.¹⁴

(3) Bhikshus, the person who is practising for one's own welfare but not for the welfare of others is the more advanced and more sublime of the [first] three persons.¹⁵

(4) Bhikshus, the person who is practising both for one's own welfare and for the welfare of others is the foremost, the best, the preeminent, the supreme, and the finest of these 4 persons.¹⁶

4 Bhikshus, just as from **a cow**¹⁷ comes milk, from milk curd, from curd butter, from butter ghee, and from ghee cream-of-ghee, which is reckoned the foremost of all these, so, too, bhikshus, **the person practising both for one's own welfare and for the welfare of others** is *the foremost, the best, the preeminent, the supreme, and the finest* of these 4 persons. [96]

These, bhikshus, are the 4 kinds of persons found existing in the world.

—evaṃ—

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⁹ *N'ev'att'ahitāya paṭipanno no para, hitāya.*

¹⁰ *Para, hitāya paṭipanno no atta, hitāya.*

¹¹ *Atta, hitāya paṭipannono para, hitāya.*

¹² *Be atta, hitāya ca [Ce Ee Ke Se c'eva] paṭipanno para, hitāya ca.*

¹³ "It cannot serve as wood," *kaṭṭh'aṭṭhaṃ pharati*, in Se. Comy: *pharati* = *sādhethi*, to accomplish (AA 3:117,4).

¹⁴ *Ayaṃ imesaṃ dvinnarū puggalānaṃ abhikkantataro ca paṇītataro ca.*

¹⁵ *Ayaṃ imesaṃ tiṇṇarū puggalānaṃ abhikkantataro ca paṇītataro ca.*

¹⁶ *Ayaṃ imesaṃ catunnarū puggalānaṃ aggo ca seṭṭho ca pāmokkho ca uttamo ca pavaro ca.*

¹⁷ The fowl are the 5 cow or bovine products (*pañca go, rasa*): milk (*khīra*), cream (*dadhi*), buttermilk [curds] (*tak-ka*), butter (*navanīta*), and ghee (*sappi*). See **Poṭṭhapāda S** (D 9,52 +n) SD 7.14; SD 50.20 comy 9-10 (2) n.