SD 65.13

Tiracchāna Kathā Sutta

The Discourse on Animal Talk | **S 56.10**
Theme: Wrong speech does not conduce to spiritual development
Translated and annotated by Piya Tan 2010, ©2026

1 Sutta summary and significance

1.1 SUTTA SUMMARY

The Tiracchāna Kathā Sutta (S 56.10) is a short advice by the Buddha against "animal talk,"[1] that is, mundane chatter, which is not beneficial for spiritual cultivation, and to instead talk about **the 4 noble truths** since they are beneficial to attaining the path of awakening.

1.2 SUTTA SIGNIFICANCE

The passage on "animal talk" (*tiracchāna,kathā*) recurs in **the Brahma,jāla Sutta** (D 1).[2] This pericope is well known.[3] Thus commentaries to "animal talk" are found both in the Dīgha Commentary (DA 1:89-91) and the Saṁyutta Commentary (SA 3:294-296).

2 The purpose of Buddha Dharma

2.1 BUDDHISM AS THE PATH OF AWAKENING

2.1.1 Knowing the truth

2.1.1.1 The Buddha often reminds us of the proper use of his teachings, that is, for understanding **the 4 noble truths** [§4] for the sake of attaining **nirvana** [§5]. "Understanding the 4 noble truths" does not refer to merely memorizing the formula for the 4 truths, whether in Pali or in any language, but more than that, for understanding these truths as a guide for seeing **true reality**, that is, of *impermanence, suffering and nonself*.

Here follows a brief reflection on the 4 noble truths in terms of practice:

the 1st noble truth [2.1.1.2, 2.1.2];
the 2nd noble truth [2.1.3];
the 3rd noble truth [2.1.4];
the 4th noble truth [2.1.5].

2.1.1.2 The 1st truth—that of suffering (*dukkha*)—points to the pervasive state of reality. We cannot really own anything in the world; we can only use it. What we cannot use, or the surplus from what we

[1] *Tiracchāna,kathā*, or "animal talk," as animals mostly walk parallel to the ground, so this kind of talk does not lead on upwards.

[2] D 1,17/1:7 f (SD 25).

[3] This pericope occurs at Mv 5.6.3 (V 1:188), Pāc 35 (V 4:164); **D 1**,17/1:7 f, **2**,52/1:66, **9**,3/1:178, **25**,2/3:36; **M 76**,4/1:513, **77**,4/2:1, **78**,3/2:23, **122**,12/3:113; **S 56.10**/5:419; **A 10.69**/5:128, **10.70**/5:129; also D:RD 3:33; S:W 5:355; A:W 5:86. For details, see SD 10.16 (3.4.2). On destiny of having wrong views, see **Lohicca S** (D 12,10/1:228). At DA 89, *gehasita,kathā* (householder talk) is grouped with *tiracchāna,kathā.* See Pācittiya 85 where the group of 6 monks indulged in such talk (V 4:163); see V:H 3:82 nn.

need to live comfortably and wisely, we should share with others who need it. This is the first Buddhist practice: that of giving (*dāna*). It helps alleviate suffering.

The idea of suffering applies to "all conditioned things" (*sabbe saṅkhārā dukkhā*), that is, the whole of this world, including ourselves. All conditioned things arise on account of causes and effects; there are many causes bringing many effects, which in turn bring more causes and more effects, and so on. This is an endless cycle of changes.

The only thing we can know is this change; this gives us 2 important points to consider. The 1st is that there is neither pause nor gap in this series of changes. We can hope or imagine that there is some kind of break in this cycle, but we then notice only an imaginary "something," and fail to notice the reality of things.

2.1.2 Suffering as meaning and purpose

2.1.2.1 The 2nd point is that this endless cycle of changes means that we cannot really have anything our way; in fact, due to incessant changes, we can *have* nothing, *own* nothing and *be* nothing, except to move on with the changes. When we learn to do this, we begin to notice the pattern of changes; we learn to live in harmony with it, like living our lives in keeping with the rising and setting of the sun, and the changes of the season.

We notice that people and all beings change in their own way; we too change in our own way. This keen observation of changes of things is called knowledge. When this knowledge lessens our suffering and increases our happiness, it is called wisdom. In this sense, *suffering* is **meaningful** to us: it is the nature of things.

2.1.2.2 Meaning brings **purpose**; we learn from suffering. We learn to let the suffering come, and let it go: like the rising and setting of the sun. We work with it and understand things better on account of seeing this *meaning* of suffering, and seeing our *purpose* in it. Once we understand suffering, we see it like rain falling on the earth, enriching it so that life grows and prospers in it.[4]

2.1.3 The arising of suffering

2.1.3.1 The 2nd truth—that of the arising (*samudaya*) of suffering—warns us that although we have only a few vital needs, we often have endless **wants**—which causes suffering mainly because we do not know how to live in the moment. Thus the truth of the arising of suffering is **craving**, the desire to collect and have more than we really need, and to feed our senses more than we need to live happily and wisely.

2.1.3.2 Craving is rooted in **ignorance**. Ignorance is blind and craving is lame. So craving hitches onto ignorance's back and directs it around without ending over uneven ground and difficult terrain. Ignorance keeps stumbling under the weight of craving, and craving falls too, and they both suffer—until they reach the path of light.

2.1.4 The path to the ending of suffering

2.1.4.1 In the practice formula of the 4 truths,[5] **the 3rd truth** is that of the path (*magga*) to the ending of suffering. A **path** is meant for travelling on, a safe way of moving to our destination. The path does not actually do anything; we must move by ourselves, that is, with the Dharma as our vehicle. This represents

[4] See SD 1.1 (4.0.1).

[5] **Mahā Saḷ-āyatanika S** (M 149,11 etc) + SD 41.9 (2.4); SD 53.26 (2). On the teaching sequence, see SD 1.1 (6.2.2.2).

self-reliance, that is, self-effort known as the 3 trainings, comprising *moral training, concentration training and wisdom training*.

Moral training refers to the effort of the body (including speech), imbued with the values of *life, work, freedom, truth and the mind*—expressed in the practice of the 5 precepts. Moral training also includes cultivating beneficial habits so that we are not distracted by the body, that is, the 5 physical senses: by *sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touches and thoughts*.

2.1.4.2 An important aspect of the body is its role in communication, that is, the use of language, ideas and culture. **The Tiracchāna Kathā Sutta** (S 56.10) specifically warns us against being distracted by "animal talk" (*tiracchāna kathā*), which is basically wrong speech which fills the mind with *greed, hatred, delusion and fear* so that we are distracted from keeping the mind focused on personal growth, spiritual cultivation and the development of liberating wisdom by understanding true reality.

Based on moral strength and stability of bodily cultivation (*bhāvita,kāya*), we are then able to train the mind. This mental training comprises freeing the mind from the gravity of sense-experiences, so that it is neither sucked into *sensual desires*, nor crushed by *hatred*, nor confused by *delusion*. The calm and clear mind then easily attains concentration (*samādhi*) and dhyana (*jhāna*). Emerging from such a concentration, the mind is then able to see deep into true reality and to understand what it sees. This is called "knowing and seeing" (*ñāṇa,dassana*), the insight that liberates.

2.1.5 The ending of suffering

2.1.5.1 In the practice formula, **the 4th truth** is that of the ending (*nirodha*) of suffering—that is, understanding the true nature of craving and letting it go. Craving arises when we imagine there is "something" that we want or are looking for; that there must be something to have and to collect or to believe in. When we understand what we desire as being merely something self-constructed, we also see it as being impermanent and unsatisfactory (bringing suffering).

We may give this "something" some grand names and speak of it piously and grandiosely with theories and doctrines; full of sound and fury but signifying nothing. Thus the wise smile when they realize how we easily fool ourselves with words. We have mistaken the signposts for the destination!

2.1.5.2 The word "**nirvana**" (*nibbāna*) easily fools us because human nature tries to conceptualize it as a place, a reward, an afterlife, or as something that answers all our problems. For us, the unawakened, it is wise to see the word *nirvana* simply like the quality *n* for "nirvana," something we are totally ignorant of since we are yet unawakened. We can at best say that we know there is this purported solution to suffering called *n, yava,nibbanaṁ,* so long as we have yet to attain it.[6]

For the moment, we may understand that nirvana or *nibbana* as literally meaning "blowing out" or "quenching," like that of a flame that has gone out completely and there is only coolness remaining—specifically, extinguishing the fires of *greed, hatred, and delusion*. It is not an escape, but a state of absolute mental clarity, peace, and freedom.

2.1.5.3 We must not fall into word-traps and wrong views about nirvana.

(1) **Nirvana is neither a place nor a destination**. It has nothing to do with any paradise or any religion; it is not even Buddhist in the sense that we may label it, like "sunshine," but it does not belong to anyone or any system. Simply, it is the uprooting of the causes of suffering (greed, hatred and delusion) and thus it is also the cessation of suffering.

[6] For a discussion on this self-contradiction (being both true and false), see SD 65.14 [2.3.1.3].

(2) Beware of **the "nirvana fallacy"** in comparing actual things with unrealistic, idealized alternatives, or some perfect solution to a particular problem; a closely related concept is the "perfect solution fallacy." In daily life, we may speak of a "perfect solution" to a problem, but this is very specific solution and probably useless in other situations. In short, nirvana is not a "solution" to some problem.

(3) **Try to experience your words directly.** Often words can mean different things to different people. Hence, it is impossible to fully describe, much less define, nirvana in words—it can only be experienced directly through our own realization. Clinging to the very idea of nirvana becomes a hindrance to freeing the mind.

(4) **Live in the present.** Religion often makes grand but empty promises. We still have to live our mundane lives daily, moment to moment. Whether we believe in some Almighty God or some future Heaven, we simply need to live this moment by letting go of our attachments here and now. If we can't learn to overcome our anger or hatred over our differences, how can we ever experience heavenly joy in some future state?

2.1.5.4 Like "nirvana," almost everything in our lives are *words or names* we give to things. Right here you are reading words I have put together to explain nirvana. Yet I seem to say that nirvana cannot be explained. If you think that I have confused you, you are right—this is a confusing topic. If you think that I am not really talking about nirvana, you are also right. If you consider, "Let me think a little more about this," you are also right.

Writing this is not about proving anything, but an invitation for us to reflect for ourselves on the nature of words and ideas. Before we can ever understand what the idea of nirvana is about—note that I only mention the "idea" of nirvana, not nirvana itself—we have to understand how words work and how our mind perceives language.

2.2 Ways of learning the Dharma

Source: Commentary on Alagaddûpama Sutta (M 22,10), SD 3.13: **MA 2:107 f.**

2.2.1 The 3 kinds of learning

"**Here, bhikshus, some sons of family learn the Dharma** for the sake of crossing over (samsara). There are **3 kinds of learning**: (1) the 'watersnake' learning, (2) learning for the sake of crossing over, and (3) the 'treasure-house' learning (as a Dharma-steward).[7]

2.2.2 "Watersnake" learning

Therein, the one who learns the Buddha's word, and thus gains robes or other requisites from the 4 assemblies,[8] recognizes the benefit, the cause, and the reason for obtaining them; this is called **the "watersnake" learning**.[9] By thus learning, the Buddha's word is fully understood, and one strives with the best effort to clarify them.[10]

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[7] ***Idha pana, bhikkhave, ekacce kula,puttā dhammaṁ pariyāpunantī*** *ti nittharaṇa,pariyatti,vasena uggaṇhanti. Tisso hi pariyattiyo: alagadda,pariyatti, nittharana,pariyatti, bhaṇḍāgārika,pariyattī ti.* (MA 2:107,12-15)

[8] Monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen.

[9] Based on the watersnake parable (*alagaddûpama*): even in Dharma study, learning should not lead to any kind of attachment, but to letting go; like firmly holding a venomous wastersnake by the neck. See **Alagaddûpama S** (M 22,10/1:133 f), SD 3.13; SD 65.6 (2.3.1.4).

[10] *Tattha yo buddha,vacanaṁ, evaṁ cīvar'ādīni vā labhissāmi, catu,parisa,majjhe va maṁ janissantī ti lābha,sakkāra,hetu pariyāpuṇāti, tassa sā pariyatti* ***alagadda,pariyatti*** *nāma. Evaṁ pariyāpuṇato hi buddha,vacanaṁ apariyāpuṇitvā niddo-k,kamanan varataraṁ.* (MA 2:107,16-20)

2.2.3 Learning for crossing over

But one who learns the Buddha's word after properly cultivating moral conduct, fulfills moral virtue; then, having properly established concentration, meditates, and, having properly established insight, practices it, and, upon reaching the path and fruit, attains the path and realizes the fruit—this is called **learning for crossing over**.[11]

2.2.4 "Treasure-house" learning

2.2.4.1 As for the one who has destroyed the influxes (*khīṇ'āsava*),[12] that learning is called **the "treasure-house" learning**. For him, there is nothing not known, nothing not abandoned, nothing not cultivated, nothing not realized. The fully developed aggregates (of the training), the eradicated defilements, the cultivated path, and the realized fruit are all present (in him).

Therefore, when learning the Buddha's word, one preserves the traditional texts (*tantī*), upholds the spiritual lineage (*vaṁsa*), and preserves the Dharma tradition (*pavenī*).[13] This is why this learning is called **the "treasure-house" learning**.[14]

2.2.4.2 But the ordinary person, unable to settle in one place like the heron fearing a dangerous spot, who is unable to be untiring in his almsround, might think,

"May the Buddha's wonderfully sweet word not be lost; I will preserve the traditional texts, uphold the noble lineage, and preserve the sangha tradition."

But is this the "treasure-house" learning? No, it is not. Why? Because he does not fully establish himself in learning. For an ordinary person, the learning is either that of the "watersnake" or that for crossing over.

For the 7 kinds of learners,[15] it is for the sake of crossing over.

As for one whose influxes are destroyed, his is the "treasure-house" learning. The learning for crossing over is included here.[16] (MA 2:107 f)

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[11] *Yo pana buddha,vacanaṁ uggaṇhitvā sīlassa āgata-ṭ,ṭhāne sīlaṁ pūretvā, samādhissa āgata-ṭ,ṭhāne samādhiṁ gabbhaṁ gaṇhapetvā, vipassanāya āgata-ṭ,ṭhāne vipassanāya paṭṭhapetvā, magga,phalānaṁ āgata-ṭ,ṭhāne maggaṁ bhavessāmi, phalaṁ sacchikarissāmī ti uggaṇhati, tassa sa pariyatti* ***nittharaṇa,pariyatti*** *nāma hoti.* (MA 2:107,21-26)

[12] The influxes (*āsava*): data of the physical senses and the mind that flood one's being, keeping it in samsara. Orig a triad: (1) sensual lust (*kām'āsava*), (2) existence (*bhav'āsava*) and (3) ignorance (*avijjâsava*); **D 2**,99.1 n (SD 8.10); **M 11**,9 n (SD 7.13). Later, a tetrad, with (3) views (*diṭṭh'āsava*), with (4) ignorance: **Cūḷa Gopālaka S** (M 34,6) n SD 61.3; also called "floods" (*ogha*) or "yokes (*yoga*):**M 34**,6 n SD 61.3; SD 9 (10.4.2.2) n; SD 30.3 (1.4.2 n); SD 70.18 (2.4.1 n).

[13] These 3 refer to respectively the texts, the noble path and the monastic tradition (renunciation for the path).

[14] *Khīṇ'āsavassa pana pariyatti* ***bhaṇḍâgārika,pariyatti*** *nāma. Tassa hi apariññataṁ appahīnaṁ abhāvitaṁ asacchikataṁ vā n'atthi. So hi pariññāta-k,khandho, pahīna,kileso, bhāvita,maggo, sacchikata,phalo; tasmā buddha,vacanaṁ pariyāpuṇanto tanti,dhārako paveni,pālako vaṁsânurakkhako vā hutvā uggaṇhāti. Iti 'ssa sā pariyatti bhaṇḍâgārika,pariyatti nāma hoti.* (MA 2:107,26-32)

[15] The 7 kinds of learners (*satta,sekha*): (1) streamwinner-to-be, (2) streamwinner-become, (3) once-returner-to-be, (4) once-returner-become, (5) nonreturner-to-be, (6) nonreturner-become, and (7) arhat-to be. SD 21.14 (2); SD 59.10 (3.4.1); SD 64.12d (2.1.1). Only the arhat-become is called "adept" (*asekha*).

[16] *Yo pana puthujjano chātaka,bhay'ādisu, gantha,dharesu ekasmiṁ ṭhāne vasituṁ asakkontesu sayaṁ bhikkhā,cārena akilamamāno atimadhuraṁ buddha,vacanan mā nassatu, tantiṁ dhāressāmi, vaṁsaṁ ṭhapessāmi, paveṇiṁ pālessamī ti pariyāpuṇāti, tassa pariyatti bhaṇḍâgārika,pariyatti hoti na hotī ti? Na hoti. Kasma? Na attano ṭhāne ṭhatvā pariyāputattā. Puthujjanassa hi pariyatti nāma alagaddā vā hoti, nittharaṇā vā. Sattannaṁ sekhānaṁ nittharaṇā vā. Khīṇ'āsavassa bhaṇḍâgārika,pariyatti yeva. Imasmiṁ pana ṭhāne nittharaṇa,pariyatti adhippetā.* (MA 2:107,33-108,8)

Tiracchāna Kathā Sutta

The Discourse on Animal Talk

S 56.10

WHAT IS *NOT* BENEFICIAL FOR THE PATH OF AWAKENING

2 Bhikshus, do not engage in any kind of **animal talk**,[17] that is,
talk about kings, talk about thieves, talk about ministers of state;
talk about armies, talk about dangers, talk about battles;[18]
talk about food, talk about drinks, talk about clothing, talk about beds;
talk about garlands, talk about scents;
talk about relatives, talk about vehicles;
talk about villages, talk about towns, talk about cities, talk about the country-side [countries];[19]
talk about women, talk about men,[20] and talk about heroes;[21] **[420]** street talk[22] and talk by the well;
talk about ancestors and the departed;[23] rambling chatter;
talk [speculating] about (the creation of) the world;[24]
talk about (the nature of) the sea;
talk about rebirth in such and such existence [talk about gain and loss].[25]

3 What is the reason for this?[26]
Because, bhikshus, this talk is unbeneficial, irrelevant to the fundamentals of the holy life, and
does *not* lead to revulsion, to dispassion, to cessation, to peace, to direct knowledge,
to awakening, to nirvana.

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[17] *Mā bhikkhave aneka,vihitaṁ tiracchana,kathaṁ katheyyātha*. *Tiracchāna,kathā* is lit "animal talk," Comy explains: "Animal talk does not conduce to the paths leading to heaven and salvation" (*anīyānikattā sagga,mokkha,-maggānaṁ tiracchāna,bhūta,kathaṁ,* SA 3:294,2-4 = DA 1:89,16 f). The word *anīyānikattā,* "non-conduciveness," comes from *a-niyyānika* [CPD sv]. The words *niyyānika* and *aniyyānikattaṁ* are thus explained in SAṬ:BE 2:539. On ***(a)nīyānika*** *see* Sadd 804,16-24 (§842).

[18] *Yuddha,kathaṁ.* Ee wr *suddha,kathaṁ.*

[19] *Janapada,kathaṁ.*

[20] *Purisa,kathaṁ,* only Be omits.

[21] Be Ee *sūra,kathaṁ*; Ee Se *surā,kathaṁ*, "talk about drunks," as noted in Comy, which adds, "There is a reading *sura,kathaṁ,* 'a talk about drinks (or better, drunkards)'." (SA 3:294,11 f)

[22] Comy: ***Visikhā,katha*** *pi asuka,visikhā suniviṭṭhā ti vā asuka,visikhāya vāsino sūrā samatthā ti vā assāda.vasen'-eva vattuṁ na vaṭṭati. Saddhā pasannā khayaṁ gatā ti evam eva vaṭṭati,* "**Street-talk**—even such as 'this street is well-planned,' 'the residents of that street are brave and competent'—it is not proper to speak for the sake of entertainment or taste. But to speak about how 'faith has become clear' and 'everything is subject to destruction'—in this way, it is proper." (SA 3:295,11-14).

[23] *Pubba,peta,kathaṁ,* about "departed relatives" (*ātīta,ñāti,kathā,* SA 3:295,19; DA 1:90,28).

[24] *Lok'akkhāyika:* SD 35.2 (2.2).

[25] *Iti,bhavâbhāva,kathā;* cf ~*hetu,* "for the sake of rebirth in such and such an existence," D 3:228,21 = A 2:10,26 = 248,28 (DA 1021,18); M 2:38,15; A 1:147,26; It 109,8 (ItA 2:156,21). Perhaps, may be rendered as "being and non-being" or as "profit and loss."

[26] *Taṁ kissa hetu* is placed *before* PTS numbering.

WHAT IS BENEFICIAL FOR THE PATH OF AWAKENING

4 When you talk, bhikshus,
you should talk about "This is suffering";
you should talk about: "This is the arising of suffering";
you should talk about: "This is the ending of suffering";
you should talk about: "This is the path leading to the ending of suffering."

5 What is the reason for this?[27]
Because, bhikshus, this talk is beneficial, relevant to the fundamentals of the holy life, and
leads to revulsion, to dispassion, to cessation, to peace, to direct knowledge,
to awakening, to nirvana.
Therefore, bhikshus,
exert yourself to understand: "This is suffering."
exert yourself to understand: "This is the arising of suffering."
exert yourself to understand: "This is the ending of suffering."
exert yourself to understand: "This is the path leading to the ending of suffering."

— evaṁ —

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[27] *Taṁ kissa hetu* is placed *before* PTS numbering.