

The Parable of the Tortoise

Kummopamasuttaṃ (SN 35.199 PTS: S iv 177)

With notes from the Pāli Commentary Saḷāyatanavagga-aṭṭhakathā (SA 3.29)

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14 January 2009.

Bhūtapubbaṃ, bhikkhave, kummo¹
kacchapo sāyanhasamayaṃ anunadītīre²
gocarapasuto³ ahosi. Sigālopi kho,
bhikkhave, sāyanhasamayaṃ anunadītīre
gocarapasuto ahosi. Addasā kho, bhikkhave,
kummo kacchapo sigālaṃ dūratova
gocarapasutaṃ. Disvāna soṇḍipañcamāni
aṅgāni sake kapāle samodahitvā⁴
apposukko tuṅhībhūto saṅkasāyati.⁵
Sigālopi kho, bhikkhave, addasa kummaṃ
kacchapaṃ dūratova gocarapasutaṃ.
Disvāna yena kummo kacchapo
tenupasaṅkami; upasaṅkamitvā kummaṃ
kacchapaṃ paccupaṭṭhito ahosi – ‘yadāyaṃ
kummo kacchapo soṇḍipañcamānaṃ
aṅgānaṃ aññataraṃ vā aññataraṃ vā aṅgaṃ
abhininnāmessati, tatheva naṃ gahetvā
uddālitvā khādissāmī’ti. Yadā kho,
bhikkhave, kummo kacchapo
soṇḍipañcamānaṃ aṅgānaṃ aññataraṃ vā
aññataraṃ vā aṅgaṃ na abhininnāmi, atha
sigālo kummamhā nibbijja pakkāmi, otāraṃ
alabhamāno.

Once, monks, a tortoise was intent on grazing along the banks of a river in the evening time. At the same time a jackal was also intent on foraging along the river. The tortoise saw the jackal in the distance. Seeing the jackal, the tortoise pulled his head and limbs into his shell, and stayed silent and still. The jackal also saw the tortoise in the distance, and went over to it. He thought: ‘when this tortoise pokes out its head, or one of its limbs I will grab it and pull it out and eat it!’ However the tortoise did not emerge from his shell and the jackal did not get an opportunity. So, becoming bored, the jackal went away.

Saḷāyatanavagga Aṭṭhakathā

1. kummoti aṭṭhikummo kacchapoti tasseva vevacanaṃ.
2. Anunadītīreti nadiyā anutīre.
3. Gocarapasutoti ‘sace kiñci phalāphalaṃ labhissāmi, khādissāmī’ti gocarathāya pasuto ussukko tannibandho
4. Samodahitvāti samugge viya pakkhipitvā.
5. Saṅkasāyatīti acchati.

Idaṃ vuttaṃ hoti – yathā kummo aṅgāni sake kapāle samodahanto sigālassa otāraṃ na deti, na ca naṃ sigālo pasahati, evaṃ bhikkhu attano manovitaṅkhe sake ārammaṇakapāle samodahanto kilesamāraṣṣa otāraṃ na deti, na ca naṃ māro pasahati.

Commentarial notes

1. SA ‘kummo’ is just a synonym for ‘kacchapo’ [tortoise].
2. ‘Anunadītīre’ means along the bank of the river.
3. ‘Gocarapasuto’ means ‘if locate any sort of food, I will eat it’; for the sake of grazing it is intent, eager, always [doing it]’
4. ‘Samodahitvā’ means ‘having put [it] in something like a box’.
5. ‘Saṅkasāyati’ is ‘sit still’

So this is what is said – just as the tortoise pulls his limbs into his shell and does not give the jackal an opportunity, and the jackal could not overcome him; so the bhikkhu pulling his turning mind back to the object of meditation does not give the taints or Māra an opportunity, and [Māra] cannot overcome [the monk].

Evameva kho, bhikkhave, tumhepi māro pāpimā satataṃ samitaṃ paccupaṭṭhito – ‘appeva nāmāhaṃ imesaṃ cakkhuto vā otāraṃ labheyyaṃ...pe... jivhāto vā otāraṃ labheyyaṃ...pe... manato vā otāraṃ labheyya’nti. Tasmātiha, bhikkhave, indriyesu guttadvārā viharatha. Cakkhunā rūpaṃ disvā mā nimittaggāhino ahuvattha, mā anubyañjanaggāhino.

Yatvādhikaraṇameṇaṃ cakkhundriyaṃ asaṃvutaṃ viharantaṃ abhiṃjḥādomanassā pāpakā akusalā dhammā anvāssaveyyuṃ, tassa saṃvarāya paṭipajjatha, rakkhatha cakkhundriyaṃ, cakkhundriye saṃvaraṃ āpajjatha. Sotena saddaṃ sutvā... ghānena gandhaṃ ghāyitvā... jivhāya rasaṃ sāyitvā... kāyena phoṭṭhabbaṃ phusitvā... manasā dhammaṃ viññāya mā nimittaggāhino ahuvattha, mā anubyañjanaggāhino.

Yatvādhikaraṇameṇaṃ manindriyaṃ asaṃvutaṃ viharantaṃ abhiṃjḥādomanassā pāpakā akusalā dhammā anvāssaveyyuṃ, tassa saṃvarāya paṭipajjatha, rakkhatha manindriyaṃ, manindriye saṃvaraṃ āpajjatha. Yato tumhe, bhikkhave, indriyesu guttadvārā viharissatha, atha tumhehipi māro pāpimā nibbijja pakkamissati, otāraṃ alabhamāno – kummamhāva sigālo’⁶ti.

Kummo aṅgāni sake kapāle,
Samodahaṃ⁶ bhikkhu manovitaṅke;
Anissito⁷ aññamaheṭṭhayāno,⁸
Parinibbuto⁹ nūpavadeyya kañci’¹⁰ti.

In the same way, monks, you should be ready because evil Māra is always waiting. He thinks ‘perhaps my opportunity will come from the eye, or the ear, or nose, or tongue, or body, or the mind.’ Therefore, monks, dwell guarding the gates of the senses. Seeing a form with the eye, do not grasp the appearance, nor the associations. Because dwelling with the eye-sense unrestrained leaves you open to attack by covetousness and grief, to wicked, unhelpful mental states. So exercise restraint, protect the eye-sense, and practice restraint of the eye. Similarly having heard a sound with the ear... smelled an odour with the ear... tasted a flavour with the tongue... touched a thing with the body... or experienced a mental state with the mind, do not grasp the appearance, nor the associations. Because dwelling with the senses unrestrained leave you open to attack by covetousness and grief, to wicked, unhelpful mental states. So exercise restraint, protect the senses, and practice restraint of the senses. Therefore, monks, dwell guarding the gates of the senses. Then evil Māra, finding no opportunity, will become bored and leave you, like the jackal left the tortoise.

The tortoise, limbs in his own shell,
Drawn up. The monk, steady mind.
Not given to oppressing others,
Completely calm, he abuses no-one.

6. Samodahanti samodahanto ṭhapento
7. Anissitoti taṅhādīṭṭhinissayehi anissito
8. Aññamaheṭṭhayānoti aññāṃ kañci puggalaṃ aviheṭṭhento
9. Parinibbutoti kilesaparinibbānena parinibbuto
10. Nūpavadeyya kañcīti aññāṃ kañci puggalaṃ sīlavipattiyā vā ācāravipattiyā vā attānaṃ ukkaṃsetukāmatāya vā paraṃ vambhetukāmatāya vā na upavadeyya, aññadatthu pañca dhamme ajjhattaṃ upaṭṭhapetvā, ‘‘kālena vakkhāmi, no akālena, bhūtena vakkhāmi, no abhūtena, saṅhena vakkhāmi, no pharusena, atthasaṃhitena vakkhāmi, no anattasaṃhitena, mettacitto vakkhāmi, no dosantaro’’ti evaṃ ullumpanasabhāvasaṅghiteneva cittena viharati.

6. ‘*Samodahaṃ*’ means remaining tucked up.
7. ‘*Anissito*’ refers to not being attached [*nissito*] to the foundations of craving and views.
8. ‘*Aññamaheṭṭhayāno*’ means not oppressing [*aviheṭṭhento*] any other person.
9. ‘*Parinibbuto*’ means the complete calming [*parinibbuto*] associated with the extinguishing of the taints.’
10. *Nūpavadeyya kañci*’ means he should not insult [*upavadati*] another person, by moral transgression, failure of manners, longing for self-aggrandisement, desire to deceive another – surely having produced five subjective states: ‘I will speak at the proper time, not at an inopportune time, I will naturally not unnaturally, I will speak kindly not harshly, I will speak profitably not uselessly, I will speak with the loving thought, not bearing illwill’ that is how to dwell with a helpful disposition.