MN 21 — MN 21 The Simile of the Saw | Kakacūpama Sutta

English translation by Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu.

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Text

The Simile of the Saw

Kakacūpama Sutta (MN 21)

I have heard that on one occasion the Blessed One was staying near Sāvatthī in Jeta’s Grove, Anāthapiṇḍika’s monastery. Now on that occasion Ven. Moliya Phagguna was spending too much time entangled with the nuns. This is how much he was spending time entangled with the nuns: If any monk spoke in dispraise of the nuns in his presence, he would be angered, displeased, and would make an issue of it. And if any monk spoke in dispraise of him in the presence of the nuns, they would be angered, displeased, and would make an issue of it. That’s how much he was spending time entangled with the nuns.

Then a certain monk went to the Blessed One and, on arrival, having bowed down to him, sat to one side. As he was sitting there, he said to the Blessed One, "Lord, Ven. Moliya Phagguna is spending too much time entangled with the nuns. This is how much he is spending time entangled with the nuns: If any monk speaks in dispraise of the nuns in his presence, he is angered, displeased, and makes an issue of it. And if any monk speaks in dispraise of him in the presence of the nuns, they are angered, displeased, and make an issue of it. That's how much he is spending time entangled with the nuns.

Then the Blessed One told a certain monk, "Come, monk. In my name, call Moliya Phagguna, saying, 'The Teacher calls you, friend Moliya Phagguna.'"

Responding, "As you say, lord," to the Blessed One, the monk went to Ven. Moliya Phagguna, and on arrival he said to him, "The Teacher calls you, friend Moliya Phagguna."

Responding, "As you say, my friend," to the monk, Ven. Moliya Phagguna went to the Blessed One and, on arrival, having bowed down to him, sat to one side. As he was sitting there, the Blessed One said to him, "Is it true, Phagguna that you are spending too much time entangled with the nuns? That this is how much you are spending time entangled with the nuns: If any monk speaks in dispraise of the nuns in your presence, you are angered, displeased, and make an issue of it? And if any monk speaks in dispraise of you in the presence of the nuns, they are angered, displeased, and make an issue of it? Is that how much you are spending time entangled with the nuns?"

"Yes, lord."

"Phagguna, aren't you a clansman who has gone forth from the home life into homelessness out of conviction?"

"Yes, lord."

"It's not fitting for you, Phagguna— a clansman who has gone forth from the home life into homelessness out of conviction—that you spend too much time entangled with the nuns. So, Phagguna, if anyone speaks in dispraise of the nuns in your presence, even then you should abandon any desires related to the household life and any thoughts related to the household life. And even then you should train yourself, 'My mind will be unaffected and I will say no evil words. I will remain sympathetic to that person's welfare, with a mind of goodwill, and with no inner hate.' That's how you should train yourself.

"And, Phagguna, if anyone gives the nuns a blow with the hand or a stone or a rod or a knife in your presence, right there you should abandon any desires related to the household life and any thoughts related to the household life. And even then you should train yourself, 'My mind will be unaffected and I will say no evil words. I will remain sympathetic to that person's welfare, with a mind of goodwill, and with no inner hate.' That's how you should train yourself.

“And, Phagguna, if anyone speaks dispraise of you in your presence, even then you should abandon any desires related to the household life and any thoughts related to the household life. And even then you should train yourself, ‘My mind will be unaffected and I will say no evil words. I will remain sympathetic to that person’s welfare, with a mind of goodwill, and with no inner hate.’ That’s how you should train yourself.

“And, Phagguna, if anyone gives you a blow with the hand or a stone or a rod or a knife, right there you should abandon any desires related to the household life and any thoughts related to the household life. And even then you should train yourself, ‘My mind will be unaffected and I will say no evil words. I will remain sympathetic to that person’s welfare, with a mind of goodwill, and with no inner hate.’ That, Phagguna, is how you should train yourself.”

Then the Blessed One addressed the monks, “Monks, how the monks used to satisfy my mind! There was the case, monks, when I addressed the monks, (saying,) ‘Monks, I eat a single meal (a day). Eating a single meal (a day), I perceive next to no illness, next to no affliction, lightness, strength, & a comfortable abiding. So you, too, should eat a single meal (a day). Eating a single meal (a day), you too will perceive next to no illness, next to no affliction, lightness, strength, & a comfortable abiding.’ I had no need for instruction with those monks. I needed only to arouse mindfulness in them.

“Suppose there were a chariot on level ground at four crossroads, harnessed to thoroughbreds, waiting with whips lying ready, so that a dexterous driver, a trainer of tamable horses, might mount and—taking the reins with his left hand and the whip with his right—drive out & back, to whatever place & by whichever road he liked. In the same way, I had no need for instruction with those monks. I needed only to arouse mindfulness in them.

“So, monks, you, too, should abandon unskillful qualities and commit yourselves to skillful qualities, and in that way you, too, will come to growth, increase, & abundance in this Dhamma-Vinaya. Suppose, monks, that—not far from a village or town—there were a large sal-forest choked with castor-oil weeds. And suppose that some man would appear, desiring its benefit, desiring its welfare, desiring its safety from burdens. Having cut down the crooked sal-saplings that robbed the sap, he would throw them out and clean up the interior of the forest; and he would tend well to the straight, well-born sal-saplings, so that at a later time the sal-forest would come to growth, increase, & abundance. In the same way, monks, you, too, should abandon unskillful qualities and commit yourselves to skillful qualities, and in that way you, too, will come to growth, increase, & abundance in this Dhamma-Vinaya.

“Once, monks, in this same Sāvatthī, there was a lady of a household named Vedehikā. This good report about Lady Vedehikā had circulated: ‘Lady Vedehikā is gentle. Lady Vedehikā is mild-tempered. Lady Vedehikā is calm.’ Now, Lady Vedehikā had a slave named Kālī who was diligent, deft, & neat in her work. The thought occurred to Kālī the slave, ‘This good report about my Lady Vedehikā has circulated: “Lady Vedehikā is gentle. Lady Vedehikā is mild-tempered. Lady Vedehikā is calm.” Now, is anger present in my lady without showing,

or is it absent? Or is it just because I'm diligent, deft, & neat in my work that the anger present in my lady doesn't show? Why don't I test her?'

"So Kālī the slave got up after daybreak. Then Lady Vedehikā said to her: 'Hey, Kālī!'

"'What, madam?'

"'Why did you get up after daybreak?'

"'No reason, madam.'

"'No reason, you wicked slave, and yet you get up after daybreak?' Angered & displeased, she scowled.

Then the thought occurred to Kālī the slave: 'Anger is present in my lady without showing, and not absent. And it's just because I'm diligent, deft, & neat in my work that the anger present in my lady doesn't show. Why don't I test her some more?'

"So Kālī the slave got up later in the day. Then Lady Vedehikā said to her: 'Hey, Kālī!'

"'What, madam?'

"'Why did you get up later in the day?'

"'No reason, madam.'

"'No reason, you wicked slave, and yet you get up later in the day?' Angered & displeased, she grumbled.

Then the thought occurred to Kālī the slave: 'Anger is present in my lady without showing, and not absent. And it's just because I'm diligent, deft, & neat in my work that the anger present in my lady doesn't show. Why don't I test her some more?'

"So Kālī the slave got up even later in the day. Then Lady Vedehikā said to her: 'Hey, Kālī!'

"'What, madam?'

"'Why did you get up even later in the day?'

"'No reason, madam.'

"'No reason, you wicked slave, and yet you get up even later in the day?' Angered & displeased, she grabbed hold of a rolling pin and gave her a whack over the head, cutting it open.

Then Kālī the slave, with blood streaming from her cut-open head, went and denounced her mistress to the neighbors: 'See, ladies, the gentle one's handiwork? See the

mild-tempered one's handiwork? See the calm one's handiwork? How could she, angered & displeased with her only slave for getting up after daybreak, grab hold of a rolling pin and give her a whack over the head, cutting it open?'

"After that this evil report about Lady Vedehikā circulated: 'Lady Vedehikā is vicious. Lady Vedehikā is foul-tempered. Lady Vedehikā is violent.'

"In the same way, monks, a monk may be ever so gentle, ever so mild-tempered, ever so calm, as long as he is not touched by disagreeable aspects of speech. But it is only when disagreeable aspects of speech touch him that he can truly be known as gentle, mild-tempered, & calm. I don't call a monk easy to admonish if he is easy to admonish and makes himself easy to admonish only by reason of robes, almsfood, lodging, & medicinal requisites for curing the sick. Why is that? Because if he doesn't get robes, almsfood, lodging, & medicinal requisites for curing the sick, then he isn't easy to admonish and doesn't make himself easy to admonish. But if a monk is easy to admonish and makes himself easy to admonish purely out of esteem for the Dhamma, respect for the Dhamma, reverence for the Dhamma, then I call him easy to admonish. So, monks, you should train yourselves: 'We will be easy to admonish and make ourselves easy to admonish purely out of esteem for the Dhamma, respect for the Dhamma, reverence for the Dhamma.' That's how you should train yourselves.

"Monks, there are these five aspects of speech by which others may address you: timely or untimely, true or false, affectionate or harsh, beneficial or unbeneficial, with a mind of goodwill or with inner hate. Others may address you in a timely way or an untimely way. They may address you with what is true or what is false. They may address you in an affectionate way or a harsh way. They may address you in a beneficial way or an unbeneficial way. They may address you with a mind of goodwill or with inner hate. In any event, you should train yourselves: 'Our minds will be unaffected and we will say no evil words. We will remain sympathetic to that person's welfare, with a mind of goodwill, and with no inner hate. We will keep pervading him with an awareness imbued with goodwill and, beginning with him, we will keep pervading the all-encompassing world with an awareness imbued with goodwill—abundant, enlarged, immeasurable, free from hostility, free from ill will.' That's how you should train yourselves.

"Suppose that a man were to come along carrying a hoe & a basket, saying, 'I will make this great earth be without earth.' He would dig here & there, scatter soil here & there, spit here & there, urinate here & there, saying, 'Be without earth. Be without earth.' Now, what do you think? Would he make this great earth be without earth?"

"No, lord. Why is that? Because this great earth is deep & enormous. It can't easily be made to be without earth. The man would reap only a share of weariness & disappointment."

"In the same way, monks, there are these five aspects of speech by which others may address you: timely or untimely, true or false, affectionate or harsh, beneficial or unbeneficial, with a mind of goodwill or with inner hate. Others may address you in a timely way or an untimely way. They may address you with what is true or what is false.

They may address you in an affectionate way or a harsh way. They may address you in a beneficial way or an unbeneficial way. They may address you with a mind of goodwill or with inner hate. In any event, you should train yourselves: 'Our minds will be unaffected and we will say no evil words. We will remain sympathetic to that person's welfare, with a mind of goodwill, and with no inner hate. We will keep pervading him with an awareness imbued with goodwill and, beginning with him, we will keep pervading the all-encompassing world with an awareness imbued with goodwill equal to the great earth—abundant, enlarged, immeasurable, free from hostility, free from ill will.' That's how you should train yourselves.

"Suppose that a man were to come along carrying lac, yellow orpiment, indigo, or crimson, saying, 'I will draw pictures in space, I will make pictures appear.' Now, what do you think? Would he draw pictures in space & make pictures appear?"

"No, lord. Why is that? Because space is formless & without surface. It's not easy to draw pictures there and to make them appear. The man would reap only a share of weariness & disappointment."

"In the same way, monks, there are these five aspects of speech by which others may address you: timely or untimely, true or false, affectionate or harsh, beneficial or unbeneficial, with a mind of goodwill or with inner hate. Others may address you in a timely way or an untimely way. They may address you with what is true or what is false. They may address you in an affectionate way or a harsh way. They may address you in a beneficial way or an unbeneficial way. They may address you with a mind of goodwill or with inner hate. In any event, you should train yourselves: 'Our minds will be unaffected and we will say no evil words. We will remain sympathetic to that person's welfare, with a mind of goodwill, and with no inner hate. We will keep pervading him with an awareness imbued with goodwill and, beginning with him, we will keep pervading the all-encompassing world with an awareness imbued with goodwill equal to space—abundant, enlarged, immeasurable, free from hostility, free from ill will.' That's how you should train yourselves.

"Suppose that a man were to come along carrying a burning grass torch and saying, 'With this burning grass torch I will heat up the river Ganges and make it boil.' Now, what do you think? Would he, with that burning grass torch, heat up the river Ganges and make it boil?"

"No, lord. Why is that? Because the river Ganges is deep & enormous. It's not easy to heat it up and make it boil with a burning grass torch. The man would reap only a share of weariness & disappointment."

"In the same way, monks, there are these five aspects of speech by which others may address you: timely or untimely, true or false, affectionate or harsh, beneficial or unbeneficial, with a mind of goodwill or with inner hate. Others may address you in a timely way or an untimely way. They may address you with what is true or what is false. They may address you in an affectionate way or a harsh way. They may address you in a beneficial way or an unbeneficial way. They may address you with a mind of goodwill or

with inner hate. In any event, you should train yourselves: 'Our minds will be unaffected and we will say no evil words. We will remain sympathetic to that person's welfare, with a mind of goodwill, and with no inner hate. We will keep pervading him with an awareness imbued with goodwill and, beginning with him, we will keep pervading the all-encompassing world with an awareness imbued with goodwill equal to the river Ganges—abundant, enlarged, immeasurable, free from hostility, free from ill will.' That's how you should train yourselves.

"Suppose there were a catskin bag—beaten, well-beaten, beaten through & through, soft, silky, free of rustling & crackling—and a man were to come along carrying a stick or shard and saying, 'With this stick or shard I will take this catskin bag—beaten, well-beaten, beaten through & through, soft, silky, free of rustling & crackling—and I will make it rustle & crackle.' Now, what do you think? Would he, with that stick or shard, take that catskin bag—beaten, well-beaten, beaten through & through, soft, silky, free of rustling & crackling—and make it rustle & crackle?"

"No, lord. Why is that? Because the catskin bag is beaten, well-beaten, beaten through & through, soft, silky, free of rustling & crackling. It's not easy to make it rustle & crackle with a stick or shard. The man would reap only a share of weariness & disappointment."

"In the same way, monks, there are these five aspects of speech by which others may address you: timely or untimely, true or false, affectionate or harsh, beneficial or unbeneficial, with a mind of goodwill or with inner hate. Others may address you in a timely way or an untimely way. They may address you with what is true or what is false. They may address you in an affectionate way or a harsh way. They may address you in a beneficial way or an unbeneficial way. They may address you with a mind of goodwill or with inner hate. In any event, you should train yourselves: 'Our minds will be unaffected and we will say no evil words. We will remain sympathetic to that person's welfare, with a mind of goodwill, and with no inner hate. We will keep pervading him with an awareness imbued with goodwill and, beginning with him, we will keep pervading the all-encompassing world with an awareness imbued with goodwill equal to a catskin bag—abundant, enlarged, immeasurable, free from hostility, free from ill will.' That's how you should train yourselves.

"Monks, even if bandits were to carve you up savagely into pieces with a two-handled saw, with a two-handled saw, he among you who let his heart get angered even at that would not be doing my bidding. Even then you should train yourselves: 'Our minds will be unaffected and we will say no evil words. We will remain sympathetic, with a mind of goodwill, and with no inner hate. We will keep pervading these people with an awareness imbued with goodwill and, beginning with them, we will keep pervading the all-encompassing world with an awareness imbued with goodwill—abundant, enlarged, immeasurable, free from hostility, free from ill will.' That's how you should train yourselves.

"Monks, if you attend constantly to this admonition on the simile of the saw, do you see any aspects of speech, slight or gross, that you could not endure?"

“No, lord.”

“Then attend constantly to this admonition on the simile of the saw. That will be for your long-term welfare & happiness.”

That is what the Blessed One said. Gratified, the monks delighted in the Blessed One’s words.

Publisher references (not part of the sutta)

See also: MN 28; SN 1:71; SN 6:2; SN 20:4–5; SN 35:88; SN 42:8; AN 5:161–162; AN 7:60; AN 10:80; Ud 2:4; Sn 1:8; Thag 6:12; Thag 16:1