

Kummôpama Sutta

The Discourse on the Parable of the Tortoise

[The benefit of restraining the senses]

(Sāmyutta Nikāya 35.240/4:177-179)

Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2006

1 Tortoise or turtle?

The Kummôpama Sutta uses the expression *kummo kacchapa*, which is a tautology. The Pali texts use *kumma* and *kacchapa* indiscriminately for both turtle and tortoise. There are today 26 species of non-marine turtles and tortoises in India. Depending on the variety of English used, “turtle” may be terrestrial or marine (especially in US and Australian English); as such, the term “marine turtle” is used to refer to the marine variety. British English normally refers to these reptiles as turtles if they live in the sea; as terrapins if they live in fresh or brackish water; and as tortoises if they live on land. However, there are exceptions, such as the Fly River Turtle (also called the Pig Nosed Turtle, *Carettochelys insculpta*) found in Australia and New Guinea. The Americans strictly use “terrapin” for the diamondback terrapin (the *Malaclemys terrapin*, which inhabits brackish water): the word *terrapin* is derived from the Algonquian word for this animal. The term *chelonian* is popular among scientists, veterinarians, and conservationists, working with these animals to refer to any member of the order Testudines.

In **the Kumma Sutta** (S 17.3), *kumma* refers to a lacustrine variety, that is, a “tortoise.”¹ In **the Chiggala Sutta 1** (S 56.47)² and **the Chiggala Sutta 2** (S 56.48),³ it clearly refers to the marine variety, that is, a “turtle.” Here, in **the Kummôpama Sutta** (S 35.240), although both words are used together (*kumma kacchapa*), it clearly refers a terrestrial tortoise (since a jackal is mentioned).

The Commentaries confirm the interchangeability between *kumma* and *kacchapa*, thus:

- SA 2:206 ad S 2:227 ***mahā,kumma,kulan ti mahantam aṭṭhi,kacchapa,kulam***
 (“*mahā,kumma,kula* means ‘the great family of the bony turtle’”);
 SA 3:92 ad S 4:177 ***kummô ti aṭṭhi,kummo, kacchapô ti tass’eva vevacanam***
 (“*kumma* means the bony turtle; *kacchapa* is its synonym”).⁴

Here *aṭṭhi,kacchapa* clearly denotes a tortoise with a hard shell or carapace. Turtles tend to have softer shells. However, as shown above, we also have *aṭṭhi,kumma*, “hard-shelled turtle.”

Buddhaghosa is evidently aware of the natural cycle of sea-turtles (*kacchapa*) in laying their eggs on land.⁵ The word *kacchapa* is also interesting in that its Sanskrit cognate is *kaśyapa*, which, as a personal family name, is spelled *Kassapa* in Pali.⁶

2 Chelonian similes

The short and simple Kummôpama Sutta aptly compares the practice of sense-restraint to the tortoise’s withdrawing itself into its shell at the first sign of danger. The Sutta’s parable pairs the tortoise with **the jackal** (*sigāla* or *siṅgāla*), which, observes the Commentary, dislikes wandering in the open, but after consuming human flesh in the charnel grounds, it simply lies in comfort (SA 3:71). There are at least four chelonian similes in the Sāmyutta:

¹ S 17.3/2:227. Apparently here the tortoise is hunted (and harpooned) for its meat: the Indians have various recipes for tortoise meat.

² S 56.47/5:455 f.

³ S 56.48/5:456 f.

⁴ See S:B 810 n317.

⁵ *Kacchapā...mahā.samuddato nikkhamitvā, samudda,tīre vālik’antare aṇḍam ṭhapetvā...mahā,samuddam eva otaranti*, “the turtles, having emerged from the great ocean, lays their eggs in the sand on the ocean beach, and then they descend into the great ocean again” (SA 2:30).

⁶ For other refs, see CPD & DP: *kacchapa*-, & DP: *kumma*; see also PED, svv.

Vammika Sutta	M 23.44	the five aggregates are like the limbs and head of a tortoise.
Kumma Sutta	S 17.3	the harpooned tortoise/turtle is symbolic of a heedless person.
Kummôpama Sutta	S 35.240	the turtle with withdrawn limbs is symbolic of sense-restraint.
Chiggala Sutta 1	S 56.47	the blind turtle and the yoke: rarity for a hell-being to reborn as a human being.
Chiggala Sutta 2	S 56.48	the blind turtle and the yoke: rarity of birth as a human being.

While the Kummôpama Sutta uses the tortoise to symbolize all the six senses—presumably, its “five limbs” (for legs and head) as *the five physical senses*, and the shell as *the mind*—**the Cha,pāṇā Sutta** (S 35.247) represents each of the six sense-faculties with a different animal.⁷

3 Māra the evil one

In mythological terms, the Kummôpama Sutta gives important instructions on how to overcome or prevent Māra the evil one from taking over our minds [§7]. The Buddhist texts present Māra in two broad ways. In the early Suttas, Māra is often employed as a *psychological* device to explain unwholesome, where, for example, the five aggregates are personified as Māra.⁸

The Commentaries mention a total of **five kinds of Māra** (*pañca,māra*), namely,

- (1) the defilements as Māra (*kilesa,māra*),
- (2) the aggregates as Māra (*khandha,māra*),
- (3) the karma-formations as Māra (*abhisāṅkhāra,māra*),
- (4) the deity Māra (*deva,putta Māra*), and
- (5) death as Māra (*maccu,māra*).

(Vism 211; ThaA 2:16, 46; VAT:Se 1/481; DAaT:Be 1:22, 17:6)⁹

On the five Māras, the first three and the fifth are clearly psychological metaphors, or even archetypes. The fifth Māra (death) can also be taken as a poetical imagery, since death is painful and whereby we lose control of everything, even our bodies, and are propelled onwards by the force of our karma (another form of Māra).¹⁰ The last, Death as Māra, is often mentioned alone in the Suttas.¹¹

The Kummôpama Sutta graphically presents the five aggregates as Māra [§7], mainly to stress the urgency of sense-restraint as the basis for mental development. It is interesting to see here that Māra (or the devil) is not outside of ourselves, but is really an integral part of our minds and bodies, that is, the five aggregates. Indeed, it is ignorance of the impermanent nature of these aggregates that turn them into Māra, enslaving us to the endless cycles of births and suffering. The liberation from Māra begins with our restraining of the senses: Māra will not be able to assails us when we close the sense-doors.

4 Restraint of the senses

4.1 THE THREEFOLD TRAINING. The purpose of early Buddhist spiritual training is that of mental calm and clarity leading to awakening, that is, the overcoming of suffering. The best tool for such a training is meditation, that is, mindfulness practice. While meditation deals directly with the mind, it is easily distracted and influenced by our bodily and verbal deeds. However, in mindfulness practice, it is easier to control our body and speech than our mind.

⁷ The eye = a snake; the ear = a crocodile; the nose = a bird; the tongue = a dog; the body = a jackal; and the mind = a monkey (S 35.2475+7/4:199 f) = SD 19.15 & Intro (2).

⁸ Eg S 3:74, 195, 198, 4:85, 91, 189, 202.

⁹ For a more detailed study, see **Māra** = SD 36.4.

¹⁰ Comys also mention 4 kinds of Māra (KhA 155; SnA 201; ItA 136): *khandha māra* (the 5 aggregates, S 3:195), *kilesa māra* (mental defilements, DhA 1:289), *abhisāṅkhāra māra* (karmic accumulation, UA 216) and *deva,putta māra* (the deity, A 2:17, SnA 44). The 4 Māras of the Mahayana texts (Mvst 3:281, Lalv 354.11, 224.8, Daśa,bhūmika S 54.17, Karuṇā,puṇḍarīka 127.7, Śikṣā,samuccaya 198.10 & Dharma Saṅgraha §80) have *mṛtyu māra* (Pali *maccu māra*) in place of *abhisāṅkhāra māra*.

¹¹ Eg S 1:156; Sn 357, 587; Dh 21, 47.

The Buddhist spiritual training—called **the threefold training**—comprises these three aspects:

training in moral virtue	(<i>sīla,sikkhā</i>)	restraint of body and speech;
training in mental concentration	(<i>samādhi,sikkhā</i>)	restraint and focus of the mind;
training in wisdom	(<i>paññā,sikkhā</i>)	wisdom, or the knowledge of true reality.

(D 1:207, 3:220; A 1:229)

The first step listed here is the spiritual training in moral strength. More correctly, we should say that moral virtue is the basis for mental concentration and wisdom. Training in moral virtue does not stop with the training in mental concentration. Indeed, the two are interconnected, mutually building and refining each other.¹² Both moral virtue and mental concentration are the bases for the training in wisdom, all of which work as a three-lane spiral path to spiritual liberation.

4.2 THE RADIANT MIND. Training in moral virtue begins and continues with the guarding of the sense-doors (*indriyesu gutta,dvāra*) [§7]. To help understand the implications of this figurative expression, we should first look at a very short Sutta in the Eka,nipāta (the Book of Ones) in the Aṅguttara, that is, a passage that describes a marvellous nature of the mind.

The Pabhassara Sutta (A 1.6.1-2), found in **the Accharā Saṅghāta Vagga** (A 1.5/1:8-10),¹³ is a short remarkable text where the Buddha declares that our mind is intrinsically pure and bright (*pabhas-sara*), that is to say, our “original nature” is that of good and light. In other words, we are not born in sin and that evil is not in our nature. Understandably, since evil is not our true nature, to persist in committing evil would only bring on conflict or suffering. As such, the purpose of the spiritual life is for us to return to this innate natural pure goodness.

1 Bhikshus, this mind is radiant, but it is defiled by adventitious impurities [impurities that “arrive” through the sense-doors].

The uninstructed [ignorant] ordinary person does not understand things as they really are.

Therefore there is no mental development for the uninstructed ordinary person, I say!¹⁴

2 Bhikshus, this mind is radiant, and it is freed from adventitious impurities [impurities that “arrive” through the sense-doors].

The instructed [wise] noble disciple understands things as they really are.

Therefore there is mental development for the instructed noble disciple, I say!¹⁵

(A 1.6.1-2/1:10; also 1.5.9-10/1:10)¹⁶

The first verse says that the unguarded mind is defiled “by adventitious impurities” or “by impurities that arrive through the sense-doors” (*āgantukehi upakkilesehi*). The Kummôpama Sutta implicitly explains how this happens: our mind is *unguarded* when we hold on to the “signs and details”¹⁷ of our sense-experiences (seeing, hearing, etc). By “**signs**” (*nimitta*) is meant the notions or images we have of what is *pleasurable or beautiful*, and being taken up by such mental projections being superimposed over the sense-experience. This is then reinforced by our looking for the “**details**” (*anuvyañjana*), for example, the person’s hand, foot, smile, laughter, voice, posture, gesture, etc, or relating the experience to a certain memory. Such actions tend to reinforce themselves into habits (*nati*) of lust that are embedded in our unconscious as latent tendencies (*anusaya*).¹⁸

¹² On the pervasion of moral virtue throughout spiritual life, incl arhathood, see **Beyond Good and Evil** = SD 18.7 esp §§8-9.

¹³ “The chapter on the finger-snap.”

¹⁴ *Pabhassaram idam bhikkhave cittam tañ ca kho āgantukehi upakkilesehi upakkiliṭṭham. Tam assutavā puthuj-jano yathā,bhūtam n’appajānati. Tasmā assutavato puthujjanassa citta,bhāvanā n’atthi ti vadāmī ti.* Qu at MA 1:167; DhA 1:23; NmA 1:22; PmA 1:242; DhsA 68.

¹⁵ *Pabhassaram idam bhikkhave cittam tañ ca kho āgantukehi upakkilesehi vippamuttam. Tam sutavā ariya,-sāvako yathā,bhūtam pajānati. Tasmā sutavato ariya,sāvakassa citta,bhāvanā atthi ti vadāmī ti.*

¹⁶ See SD 8.3(6).

¹⁷ *Nimitta* and *anuvyañjana*: see SD 19.14.

¹⁸ On *anusaya*, see SD 31.3.

The same process occurs when we look for *painful or ugly* aspects of sense experience and dwell on their signs and details. Such actions become habits of aversion or dislike that are embedded in our unconscious as latent tendencies. Similarly, when the mind is not preoccupied with either such thoughts—that is, *neither with pleasant nor painful* sense-objects—we simply sink into boredom, when ignorance would be reinforced. During all these these phases of sense-experience, the simplest and safest thing to do is to contemplate on their *impermanence*.

4.3 GUARDING THE SENSE-DOORS. The sense-objects themselves are “neutral” in the sense that they are neither pleasant nor unpleasant: our thinking makes them so. **The Nibbedhika Pariyāya Sutta** (A 6.63) is very clear about this:

There are these five cords of sensual pleasures (*kāma, guṇa*):

Forms cognizable by the eye that are desirable, attractive, pleasant, endearing, associated with sensuality, delightful;

Sounds cognizable by the ear that are...delightful;

Smells cognizable by the nose that are...delightful;

Tastes cognizable by the tongue that are...delightful;

Touches cognizable by the body that are desirable, attractive, pleasant, endearing, associated with sensuality, delightful.

—Monks, these are not sensual objects (*kāma*), but in the noble discipline, they are called “cords of sensual desire” (*kāma, guṇa*).¹⁹

The thought of passion is a person’s sensuality:

There is no sensuality in what is beautiful (*citra*) in the world.

The thought of passion is a person’s sensuality:

What is beautiful in the world remains as they are.

So here the wise remove the desire for them.²⁰ (A 6.63.3/3:411) = SD 6.11

It is when we project thoughts of liking, or of disliking, or of unconcern, towards the sense-objects, that they become defiled. When we become preoccupied with *liking* something, we reinforce that liking, strengthening it as craving or lust. When we are preoccupied with *disliking* something, we reinforce that disliking, strengthening it as hate or aversion. When we unmindfully let “boring” sense-experiences occur without our noting their impermanence, we reinforce our ignorance. This is when Māra the evil one will enter our minds through the sense-doors and take control of us. This is a colourful way of saying that if we fail to notice the impermanent nature of our sense-experiences, we will move through life on autopilot, losing control of ourselves and heading for certain disaster.

To live mindfully is to dwell with our sense-doors guarded. The practice of guarding the sense-doors can be summarized in this way.²¹

Look less,	see more;
Hear less,	listen more;
Smell less,	breathe more;
Eat less,	taste more;
Touch less,	feel more;
Think less,	mind more;
Talk less,	ask more;
Do less,	be more;
Be true,	no more. ²²

¹⁹ *Api ca kho bhikkhave n’ete kāmā, kāma, guṇā nam’ete ariyassa vinaye vuccanti.* This is an enigmatic statement whose meaning is clarified in the verse that follows. See foll n.

²⁰ This verse, which explains the previous prose sentence, “plays upon the double meaning of *kāma*, emphasizes that purification is to be achieved by mastering the defilement of sensuality, not by fleeing [from] sensually enticing objects.” (A:NB 1999:302 n34)

²¹ See SD 17.3 Intro (3).

With this kind of self-training, we can easily keep the precepts²³ so that they form the fertile ground for mindfulness practice.

Sense-restraint or guarding the sense-doors is clearly an essential part of mindfulness practice,²⁴ whose purpose is not to react negatively in the face of covetousness and discontent [§7].²⁵ Mindfulness, as such, is an alert, non-reactive state of mind²⁶ of “letting come, letting go,” that through sustained effort (*ātāpī*) leads one to mental concentration (*samādhi*). In short, mindfulness “does not change experience, but only deepens it.” (Analayo 2003:58)

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²² That is, once you have directly seen *true reality*, there is no *more* suffering.

²³ On details of the precepts, see **Sāleyakka S** (M 41/1:285-290) = SD 5.7 Intro (2); see also **Veḷu,dvāreyya S** (S 55.7) = SD 1.5); **Pañca,bhera,bhaya S** (S 12.41/2:68-70) = SD 3.3; **Vera S** (A 5.174/3:204-206) = SD 6.4.

²⁴ See SD 13.1 Intro (3.1c).

²⁵ See SD 13.1 Intro (4.2e).

²⁶ On the “non-reactive state of mind,” see Analayo 2003:175 f.

The Discourse on the Parable of the Tortoise

(S 35.240/4:177-179)

The tortoise and the jackal

3²⁷ Once upon a time, bhikshus, a tortoise²⁸ was foraging for food along the bank of a river in the evening. Now on that same evening, a jackal, too, was foraging for food along the bank of the same river.

4 Bhikshus, when the tortoise saw the jackal from afar foraging for food, [178] it drew its five limbs—its legs and neck²⁹—into its shell and passed the time keeping still [at ease] and silent.³⁰

5 The jackal, too, bhikshus, had from afar seen the tortoise foraging for food. Having seen the tortoise from afar, he approached it and waited nearby, thinking:

“When this tortoise extends one or other of its five limbs, I will grab it right there, pull it out, and eat it!”

6 But, bhikshus, because the tortoise did not extend one or other of its five limbs, the jackal, failing to gain access to the tortoise, was disheartened and left.

Māra is always close by

7 Even so, bhikshus, Māra the evil one is constantly and always waiting close by you, thinking:

“Perhaps I will gain access to him through the eye!

Or, perhaps I will gain access to him through the ear!

Or, perhaps I will gain access to him through the nose!

Or, perhaps I will gain access to him through the tongue!

Or, perhaps I will gain access to him through the body!

Or, perhaps I will gain access to him through the mind!”

Guard your sense-doors!

Therefore, bhikshus, dwell with your sense-doors guarded!

(1) Having seen **a form** with the eye, do not grasp its signs and details.³¹

For, if you leave the eye faculty unguarded, evil unwholesome states of covetousness and discontent³² might assail you.

Practise restraining your eye: guard the eye faculty, keep up the restraint of the eye faculty!

(2) Having heard **a sound** with the ear, do not grasp its signs and details.

For, if you leave the ear faculty unguarded, evil unwholesome states of covetousness and discontent might assail you.

Practise restraining your ear: guard the ear faculty, keep up the restraint of the ear faculty!

(3) Having smelt **a smell** with the nose, do not grasp its signs and details.

²⁷ I follow PTS numbering: §§1-2: *Evam me sutam. Ekam samayaṃ Bhagavā Sāvattthiyāṃ...pe...āmantesi. Bhagavā etad avoca.* See S 4:172,19.

²⁸ *Kummo kacchapo*, a tautology. See Intro (1).

²⁹ *Soṇḍi.pañcamānaṃ aṅgānaṃ*, lit “its limbs with the neck as the fifth.”

³⁰ “Keeping still and silent,” *appossukko tuṅhī,bhūto saṃkasāyati*: as at **Navaka Bhikkhu S** (S 21.4). The word *appossukka* resolves as *appa* (little) + *ussuka* (zealous), meaning “not busy, inactive,” used in reference to one refraining from being busily engaged in various activities. The word is often tr as “living at ease” (eg S 9.10/1:202, 21.4/2:277, 51.10/5:262), but here “keeping still” fits better. The n *appossukkatā* is used at **Āyācana S** (S 6.1.5/-1:137 = SD 12.2, qv n) in ref to the Buddha’s inclination, immediately after his awakening towards a life of quietude rather than the busy task of teaching the Dharma. For an analysis of *appossukka*, see S:B 361 n54

³¹ See Intro (4.3).

³² *Abhijjhā,domanassa*, simply refers to liking and disliking, but technically, here refers to the 5 mental hindrances (*pañca,nīvaraṇa*): (1) sense-desire, (2) ill will, (3) sloth and torpor, (4) restlessness and worry, and (5) doubt. See SD 13.1 Intro (4.2e).

For, if you leave the nose faculty unguarded, evil unwholesome states of covetousness and discontent might assail you.

Practise restraining your nose: guard the nose faculty, keep up the restraint of the nose faculty!

(4) Having tasted **a taste** with the tongue, do not grasp its signs and details.

For, if you leave the tongue faculty unguarded, evil unwholesome states of covetousness and discontent might assail you.

Practise restraining your tongue: guard the tongue faculty, keep up the restraint of the tongue faculty!

(5) Having felt **a touch** with the body, do not grasp its signs and details.

For, if you leave the body faculty unguarded, evil unwholesome states of covetousness and discontent might assail you.

Practise restraining your body: guard the body faculty, keep up the restraint of the body faculty!

(6) Having cognized **a mind-object** with the mind, do not grasp its signs and details.

For, if you leave the mind faculty unguarded, evil unwholesome states of covetousness and discontent might assail you.

Practise restraining your mind: guard the mind faculty, keep up the restraint of the mind faculty!

8 Bhikshus, when you dwell with the sense-doors guarded,³³ Māra, failing to gain access to you, will be disheartened and leave, just as the jackal left the tortoise. [179]

Like the tortoise drawing its own limbs into its shell,
A monk, drawing in the mind's thoughts,
Independent, not troubling anyone,
Totally cooled would not blame anyone.³⁴

— evaṃ —

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³³ *Indriyesu gutta, dvārā viharatha*, lit “dwell with the doors to the senses guarded!”

³⁴ This verse as at **Dukkara S** (S 35*/1.17/1:7). Bodhi: “As the verse is not preceded by the usual sentence stating that the Buddha spoke it on this occasion, it seems the redactors of the canon have tacked it on by reason of the tortoise simile.” (S:B 1424 n186). [The asterisk * means that S 35 is a verse.]