



# Monkey Fist Sutra

by Mu Soeng

Inspired by *Makkata Sutta*, SN 47:7

and *Udana Sutta*, SN 22:55

“Friends, the monkey-catcher in the village takes a pot with a wide bottom and narrow opening and buries the pot in the ground to where the opening of the jar is just above the ground. Then he would put a piece of fruit or nuts at the bottom of the jar. The monkey would be attracted to the jar by the smell of the fruit or hunger or curiosity. The monkey reaches down into the narrow opening of the jar to grab hold of the treat. But its closed fist will not come out through the narrow opening. The monkey gets excited and frustrated, but it will not abandon the food in its fist. It lays down and howls. But it will not let go of the food it has grasped and thus get out of the trouble it has fallen into. Even when the monkey sees the catcher approaching, it will not abandon the food it has grasped in its fist.

“In the same way, friends, the closed fist of the human mind is not different from the monkey’s fist. Human beings close the hand of thought around their views, perceptions, and mental fabrications and cannot let go of what they have grasped.

“Friends, the liberation that I teach is opening the hand of thought. It is opening the closed fist of one’s own mind. This fist of the mind clutches itself around views, opinions, ideas, preferences, likes, dislikes, identities, passions, insecurities,

anxieties, unresolved issues, instability, uncertainty, confusion, unsatisfactoriness, and a general sense of unease.

“Human beings do not easily abandon what they have grasped just as the monkey does not. While the monkey has grasped onto fruit or nuts in the pot, human beings close their fist around something that is entirely ideational. They do not discern that their perception is not direct seeing but an idea of the seen through conditioned habits of perception. It is a misperception and as such ideational. What is being grasped is fictional because it is only an idea that is being grasped. It does not have the concreteness of what the monkey grasps.

“Friends, the grasping of something fictional gets further fictionalized by the fictions of I, me, mine. It becomes the case of a fictional grasper grasping something fictional. In this grasping, the grasper does not realize that they themselves are a momentary construct of their own grasping. The layers of fictional constructs are not fully understood and are hard to abandon.

“The monkey does not let go of the food he has grasped even when he sees the catcher approaching. Human beings do not open the fist of I-me-mine even when they see Yama, the lord of death, approaching. Their closed fist of I-me-mine becomes the ground of their re-becoming in the next lifetime. This closed fist is the clinging (*upadana*) and its power is as great as the power of craving (*tanha*).

“Friends, the grasping power of I, me, mine is subtle and insidious. And, therefore, its abandonment is equally difficult and frustrating. Why is it so? It is because an uninstructed person gives unwise attention to the appeal or the pleasurable that accompanies the sensory experience. Because of unwise attention, they get caught in the sticky trap of the perceptual object. In the sticky trap, there can be no freedom of mind just as the monkey surrenders his freedom to let go of the grasped food and pull out his hand.

“It is the case, friends, that human beings, when caught in the sticky trap, subtly and unknowingly yearn for more gratification than the object of grasping is capable of

delivering. They do not realize that instead of satisfying their desires, such experiences merely stir up more desire. Without wise attention to the closed loop of their experience, they normalize a habit of seeking satisfaction of desire through the pursuit of pleasure in the realms of the senses.

“For this reason, friends, you should not wander into what is not your proper range. In one who wanders into what is not their proper range, Mara gains an opening, Mara gains a foothold. And, friends, what is not your proper range? The five strands of sensuality are not your proper range. What five? Forms cognizable by the eye — agreeable, pleasing, charming, endearing, fostering desire, enticing. Sounds cognizable by the ear... Aromas cognizable by the nose... Flavors cognizable by the tongue... Tactile sensations cognizable by the body — agreeable, pleasing, charming, endearing, fostering desire, enticing.

“A noble disciple of the Tathāgata does not wander into the territory of the five strands of sensuality, as does the foolish monkey only to get stuck in the monkey trap. They pay wise attention (*yoniso manasikāra*) to what is foolish and greedy in their conditioning and do not act upon it. They do not wander in the pastures of seeking gratification in the things of the world that present themselves to their senses. By remaining mindful and fully aware of the danger of seeking gratification, they begin to undermine the mechanism by which the conditioned mind gets stuck to the objects of experience.

“They undermine the mechanism by changing their frame of reference through which sense experience is received and processed. They remain mindful and alert to their own foolish and greedy nature, and they do not grasp the promise of the sweetness of pleasure in which each sense input is wrapped. They recognize that the promise of the sweetness of pleasure is not their pasture and is outside their territory. They do not get stuck in the sticky trap of seeking gratification in the five strands of sensuality.

"Friends, from the discernment of one's proper range of wandering and knowing the territory of one's pasture comes

abandoning. From the abandoning of seeking gratification in five strands of sensuality a dedicated practitioner remains anchored in abandoning and breaks free of the [five] lower fetters.

“Friends, the immediate reward of abandonment is that one does not fall into fear over what is not a ground for fear. They do not fear the approach of Yama, the lord of death, in the way that the foolish monkey fears the hunter approaching the trap where he is stuck. The fear is abandoned in a noble practitioner because the passion for the property of [physical] form has been abandoned. . . passion for the property of feeling has been abandoned. . . passion for the property of perception . . . passion for the property of fabrications. . . passion for the property of consciousness has been abandoned.

“Then, owing to the abandonment of passion, the support for consciousness [of I-me-mine] is cut off, and there is no base for consciousness. Consciousness, thus unestablished, not proliferating, not performing any function, is released. Owing to its release, it stands still. Owing to its stillness, it is contented. Owing to its contentment, it is not agitated. Not agitated, the practitioner is totally unbound right within. The noble disciple discerns that ‘Birth is ended, the holy life fulfilled, the task done. There is nothing further for this world.’

"For one knowing in this way, seeing in this way, friends, there is the opening of the fist, and abandoning of whatever is being grasped therein. It is opening the hand of thought. This opening of the hand of thought, friends, is the letting go of all ideational formations and their fictional grasping. It is discernment that leads to the abandonment of whatever creates causes and conditions for stress and anguish.

“But, friends, once views, opinions, ideas, preferences, likes, dislikes, identities, passions, insecurities, anxieties, unresolved issues, instability, uncertainty, confusion, unsatisfactoriness, and a general sense of unease have been abandoned, have been let go, they must not be replaced by another set of views, opinions, ideas, preferences, likes,

identities, and passions. Opening the hand of thought means one trains in what to focus on, what to turn away from, what to enhance, what to let go of, what to cultivate, and what to renounce. This is the immediate ending of fermentations and lamentations."