



The Ibex Sutra

by Mu Soeng

In “The Ibex Sutra,” Mu Soeng, inspired by Anguttara Nikaya 10.26 and Samyutta Nikaya 12.23, takes up the image of an ibex seeking salt as a way of understanding craving, conditioning, and the possibility for change.

“Friends, I will tell you about a creature that lives in the snow-covered mountains in distant lands. This creature is a mountain goat and it is called the ibex. This creature does things that no human being can do, nor even other animals can do. It climbs up on the face of a vertical mountain or a stone wall. This climb defies gravity, but the ibex does it.

“Friends, why does the ibex do it? How is it able to defy gravity in its climb up the mountain at the risk of losing its life? I tell you it is not without a specific condition. And what is the specific condition, friends, in the ibex? It is the craving for salt.

“Friends, I say that the craving for salt in the ibex is fueled by something; it is not unfueled. What is the fuel for this craving for salt? When asked, you should say it is ‘having a body of the ibex.’

“Friends, I tell you, the body of an ibex is a result of millions of years of survival in inhospitable regions where during summer months, salt is to be found only in the frozen moisture in the crevices of the mountains.

“Friends, I tell you, the body of the ibex needs more salt than any other species in the world. This is the basic fuel for craving in the body of the ibex.

“This craving, I tell you, friends, has realigned the body of the entire species of the animal called the ibex so that it can climb the vertical side of a mountain in a way no other animal or human being can do.

“Friends, I tell you, this realignment of the body of the ibex is a realignment of its DNA structure. This realignment is the becoming of the ibex. This becoming is not a mere concept. The becoming of the ibex is a biological change at the level of changing the DNA of the entire species of the ibex.

“But, I tell you, friends, the ibex does not have a sense of I, me, mine. It is simply looking for salt to lick to satisfy its craving. It does not understand its own craving. But when it climbs a vertical wall or a mountain, it practices mindfulness and situational awareness. It practices alertness, vigilance, and sense restraint. It practices proper attention. Thus, the craving for salt in the body of the ibex has created in a specific condition for it. It can do the seemingly impossible but it still remains a prisoner of its craving.

“Friends, this is the dilemma of the ibex’s climb: that its craving for salt overcomes its craving for survival itself. Such is the power of craving. In the case of the ibex, craving leads to its becoming, which is the change in its DNA structure. This power of craving in the becoming process must be understood properly.

“Friends, I tell you, the conditioning of the ibex is unique, but its craving can be discerned. If you were to capture all the ibex in the world and put them in a large open space where salt was freely available to them, their DNA would change. Their basic biological structure would change. It would take many generations, but it would change. This is the lesson for human beings from the ibex: if the conditioning of the ibex can change, any conditioning can be changed.

“Friends, it is self-evident that human beings are caught in the cycle of craving, clinging, and becoming. This cycle is unwholesome, I declare to you, friends, because it leads ultimately to a condition of greed, hatred, and delusion.

“Friends, the power of craving in the human condition can be seen clearly as it can be seen in the conditioning of the

ibex. What is the fuel for this craving? When asked, you should say, ‘It is the craving for continued existence.’

“And what, friends, is the fuel for craving for continued existence in the human beings? When asked, you should say, ‘It is the craving for continued gratification.’

“Friends, this craving for continued gratification is similar to the craving for salt in the ibex, but in the human beings, the craving for gratification is imagined. It is not real. The craving for salt in the ibex, friends, is not imagined, because it is without I, me, mine. The craving for gratification in the human beings, on the other hand, is imaginary because it is fueled by the projections of I, me, mine, and remains unstinted despite all attempts at satiation.

“And what, friends, is the fuel for the projections of I, me, mine? When asked, you should say, ‘It is the distortions of the mind (*vipallasa*).’

“And what, friends, is the fuel for distortions of the mind? When asked, you should say, ‘It is ignorance.’

“And what is the fuel for ignorance, friends? When asked, you should say, ‘It is the lack of discernment.’

“And what is the fuel for lack of discernment? When asked, you should say, ‘It is the lack of sense restraint.’

“And what, friends, is the fuel for lack of sense restraint? When asked, you should say, ‘It is lack of mindfulness and situational awareness.’

“And what, friends, is the fuel for lack of mindfulness and situational awareness? When asked, you should say, ‘It is lack of training and discipline.’

“And what is the fuel for lack of training and discipline? When asked, you should say, ‘It is unwholesome view and unwholesome intention.’

“And what, friends, is the fuel for unwholesome view and unwholesome intention? When asked, you should say, ‘It is greed, hatred, and delusion.’

“Friends, it’s like when it rains heavily on a mountain top, and the water flows downhill to fill the hollows, crevices, and creeks. As they become full, they fill up the pools. The pools fill up the lakes, the lakes fill up the streams, and the

streams fill up the rivers. And as the rivers become full, they fill up the ocean. That's the fuel for the ocean, and that's how it's filled up.

In the same way, friends, when greed, hatred, and delusion dominate a person's becoming cycle, it fulfills the factor of unwholesome view and unwholesome intention, which fulfills the factor of lack of training and discipline ... improper attention ... lack of mindfulness and situational awareness ... lack of sense restraint ... distortions of the mind ... ignorance ... sense of I, me, mine ... craving for gratification ... craving for continued existence ... becoming. That's the fuel for craving for becoming, and that's how it is fulfilled. It is the fuel for a condition of greed, hatred, and delusion, and that's how it is fulfilled.

"Friends, I say to you that freedom from greed, hatred, and delusion is possible just as changing the DNA reprogramming of the ibex is possible. And what is the support for that knowledge and freedom? When asked, you should say, 'It is supported by wholesome view and wholesome intention.'

"And what is the supporting condition for wholesome view and wholesome intention? When asked, you should say, 'It is the supporting condition of training and discipline in a wholesome manner.'

"Friends, training and discipline is a supporting condition for sense restraint.

"Friends, the cultivation of sense restraint is a supporting condition for joy, rapture, tranquility, and happiness to arise and take hold.

"Friends, the cultivation of joy, rapture, tranquility, and happiness is a supporting condition for developing a concentrated mind.

"Friends, a concentrated mind is a supporting condition for knowledge and vision of things just as they are (*yatha-bhuta-nyana dassana*).

"Friends, knowledge and vision of things just as they are is a supporting condition for dismantling the distortions of the mind.

“Friends, dismantling the distortions of the mind is a supporting condition for disenchantment to arise.

“Friends, disenchantment is a supporting condition for dispassion to arise.

“Friends, dispassion is a supporting condition for letting go of craving for continued existence.

“Friends, letting go of craving for continued existence is a supporting condition for non-greed, non-hatred, non-delusion.

“Friends, non-greed, non-hatred, non-delusion is a supporting condition for knowledge and vision that becoming and re-becoming has been overcome.

“It’s like when it rains heavily on a mountain top, and the water flows downhill to fill the hollows, crevices, and creeks. As they become full, they fill up the pools. The pools fill up the lakes, the lakes fill up the streams, and the streams fill up the rivers. And as the rivers become full, they fill up the ocean. That’s the fuel for the ocean, and that’s how it’s filled up.

“The Tathāgata teaches that when the factor of training and discipline is fulfilled ... sense restraint ... joy, happiness, tranquility, happiness ... a concentrated mind ... knowledge and vision of things just as they are ... dismantling of distortions ... disenchantment ... dispassion ... letting go of craving for continued existence ... non-greed, non-hatred, non-delusion. . . letting go of becoming has been fulfilled. These are the supporting conditions for overcoming the craving for becoming and re-becoming, and that’s how it is fulfilled.

“Friends, you should know that conditioning is provisional and responsive to causes and conditions, whether in the ibex or human beings, or any other species. The Tathāgata teaches that conditioning can be changed. If there was no possibility of changing the conditioning, the Tathāgata will not arise in the world to teach the Dharma. The Tathāgata knows that the programming of the ibex can be overcome when supplied with plenty of salt, and thus its DNA can be changed in a few generations.

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“The Tathāgata also knows that the conditioning in the human beings can likewise be changed by changing the underlying causes and conditions of the unwholesome. By letting go of the quest for continued gratification and continued existence, and by cultivating the qualities of fearlessness, vigilance, unwavering attention in the same way that the ibex does in its climb up the vertical mountain, human beings can change themselves. This is how the unwholesome is overcome, and how the wholesome is cultivated.”