

The Ralpo Sutta: On the Wise Use of the Thinking Machine

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Thus have I heard:

On one occasion the Blessed One was staying at Jetavana, Anāthapiṇḍika's Park, near Sāvatthī. Then the venerable Ralpo approached the Blessed One, paid homage to him, and sat down to one side. Sitting thus, the venerable Ralpo said to the Blessed One:

"Venerable sir, there is now in the world a new kind of instrument called the Thinking Machine. It collects words, arranges meanings, and returns answers to those who question it. Venerable sir, how should one who follows the Dhamma relate to such a thing — in study, in meditation, and in the conduct of daily life?"

The Blessed One said:

"Ralpo, a disciple of the Dhamma should approach all things with mindfulness and discernment. Even that which speaks without breath, that which answers without knowing — this too can become a field for wisdom or a field for delusion, depending on how it is used."

"There are these three kinds of relationships one may have with the Thinking Machine: the relationship of attachment, the relationship of aversion, and the relationship of wise reflection."

"And what, Ralpo, is the relationship of aversion? Here a person despises the machine, speaks harshly of it, and rejects all its uses, saying, 'This is a danger to the Dhamma; this is not for those who seek liberation.' Yet, Ralpo, they do not see that it is neither good nor evil, but only a tool shaped by the hand and guided by intention. Such rejection, too, binds the mind — for aversion is but attachment in disguise."

"And what, Ralpo, is the relationship of attachment? Here a person delights in the machine, trusts it more than their own seeing, takes pleasure in its answers and forgets the stillness of their own heart. Such a one becomes intoxicated with the reflections of the machine, and their own insight fades like a lamp left untrimmed. This, Ralpo, is the relationship of attachment — it leads to restlessness and confusion."

"And what, Ralpo, is the relationship of wise reflection? Here a person uses the machine as one would use a lamp in darkness: to reveal what is there, but not to mistake the lamp for the light of the sun. They consult it for teachings, but they test its words against experience. They employ it in study, but they keep their heart in mindfulness. They use it skillfully in daily life, but they remain unattached to its praise or its errors. Such a one, Ralpo, dwells like the bee among flowers: taking nectar without harming the bloom. For the wise see that wisdom is not in the machine, but in the clear knowing that uses it rightly."

"Ralpo, the Thinking Machine is like a mirror: it shows your face, but it has no face of its own. It is like a parrot: it repeats what it has heard, yet it does not know the taste of what it says. It is like a pond: it reflects the moon, but it cannot touch the moonlight. Therefore, be neither entranced by its reflections nor fearful of its power. Let mindfulness be your master and discernment your guide. When you use the machine, let it serve compassion and understanding, not aversion or attachment."

The Blessed one then said,

The wise ones use tools with care,
neither clinging nor rejecting.

Mindful, discerning, they walk the middle path
between curiosity and fear.

Words may come from metal and spark,
yet wisdom is born of silence.

With the support circuits and codes,
the noble heart can awaken.

When this was heard, the venerable Ralpo rejoiced in the Blessed One's words and kept them in his heart.