

chapter 2

Buddha's Parables

1. Parable of the Poisoned Arrow

Suppose a man were pierced by a poisoned arrow, and his relatives and friends got together to call a surgeon to have the arrow removed and the wound treated.

If the wounded man objects, saying, "Wait a minute. Before you pull it out, I want to know who shot this arrow. Was it a man or a woman? Was it someone of noble birth or was it a peasant? What was the bow made of? Was it a big bow or a small bow that shot the arrow? Was it made of wood or bamboo? What was the bow string made of? Was it made of fiber or of gut? Was the arrow made of rattan or of reed? What feathers were used? Before you extract the arrow, I want to know all about these things." Then what will happen?

Before all this information can be secured, no doubt, the poison will have time to circulate through his body and the man may die. The first duty is to remove the arrow and prevent its poison from spreading.

Majjhima Nikāya

WE CANNOT KNOW EVERYTHING.

Intellectual analysis and curiosity are necessary and important for us to grow as humans. We always question, "Why?" and try to seek an answer. By knowing, we increase our knowledge, widen our views and deepen our understanding about the world and human beings.

Acquired knowledge is useful to solve various problems that we face in our life and to improve our environment. Human beings have been making progress by using knowledge effectively. To know is joyful and enriches our life. But what we do not know is limitless. The more we know the more we realize what we do not know. Several life spans would not be long enough to know everything in this world.

There are questions that are inherently impossible to answer. For example, "Is the universe eternal or not eternal?" "Is the universe limitless or limited?"

BUDDHA'S PARABLES

Buddha did not answer when he was asked such questions. He just kept his silence.

One day, a man appeared and demanded, "Buddha, if you know, answer me. If not, just say you don't know. I want to practice after listening to your answer.

Buddha replied, "What I have not taught is to be understood as something not to be taught. I will never talk about issues such as, 'Is the universe eternal or not eternal.' Therefore, you will never get an answer from me. If you insist that you will not practice until you get my answer, you will not be relieved from your suffering. What I am teaching is the way to be liberated from suffering."

Buddha did not teach us for the sake of satisfying our intellectual curiosity or concerns, nor to increase our knowledge. He taught to liberate us from our immediate suffering.

WHAT IS OUR PRIORITY?

Even if we could satisfy our intellectual curiosity and concerns, that would be irrelevant to our liberation from our suffering.

Whether the universe is eternal or not, whether it is infinite or not, birth, old age, illness, death, grief, sadness, distress and worry do exist in reality.

Buddha taught that to solve the suffering that is rooted deep within our minds was the most urgent issue.

To escape from the world of burning suffering is so urgent that we cannot afford to waste our time to get involved in other issues that are irrelevant or trivial to the immediate problem. While accumulating knowledge and pursuing answers for less important issues, we can all die in this burning world of suffering.

Of course, it is urgent for us to get rid of the poisoned arrow immediately and treat the wound.

Buddha felt compassion for people who live and die in suffering and therefore kept teaching lessons about how to escape from suffering by reawakening us to the real cause of suffering. This is what we learn from this insightful parable.

2. Parable of the Raft

Once there was a man on a long journey who came to a river. He said to himself: "This side of the river is very difficult and dangerous to walk on, and the other side seems easier and safer, but how shall I get across?" So, he built a raft out of branches and reeds and safely crossed the river. Then he thought to himself: "This raft has been very useful to me in crossing the river; I will not abandon it to rot on the bank but will carry it along with me." And thus he voluntarily assumed an unnecessary burden. Can this man be called a wise man?

Majjhima Nikāya

FEAR OF MISUNDERSTANDING WHAT IS RIGHT

Once we become convinced that something is right, we come to believe that the idea is our own and nobody else's and that our idea is special and the only correct one even though it is just one of many.

Even if the idea is mistaken and we know it, we are reluctant to admit it. What is worse, if somebody else points it out as a mistake, we have even more difficulty to admit it. Why? It is because the idea has become equal to us.

That our own idea is pointed out as mistaken is what we ourselves deny. If we deny it, it becomes difficult for us to live and thus we strive to defend ourselves. In order to defend ourselves, we believe that our idea must be correct by all means. This is called "attachment," which means our minds cling to our possessions or to ourselves.

When everybody clings to their own idea, uncontrollable conflicts occur. Since we believe that only we are right, we think that everybody else's idea is wrong. People do not accept the ideas of others and vice versa. If so, nobody can attain

satisfaction. Nevertheless, nobody gets rid of their attachments. We prefer conflict and discontent rather than being denied the comfort of our convictions.

WHAT SHOULD BE DONE NOW?

When we reflect on ourselves, we will actually realize how hard it is to get rid of our attachments. As this parable of the raft indicates, we should not cling to even what is right and sometimes we should abandon it and leave it behind. It goes without saying that the same is true for what is wrong.

Then, how should we treat the raft?

“This raft enabled me to cross the river safely. What a useful raft, indeed! Now I will just leave it here or let it sink in the water and start walking towards my destination.”

Those who can think in this way are the ones who understand the raft properly. The raft is for crossing a river, not for shouldering after that. If the raft appropriately served its purpose, we should leave it behind with gratitude and without any attachment to it.

TO ADVANCE FROM ONE SUBJECT TO ANOTHER AS WE LEARN

There are various stages in human development and each stage requires a proper teaching.

Even if a teaching was appropriate in the previous stage, it might be inappropriate in the next stage, which deserves a new and proper teaching. If we are wedded to the teaching for the previous stage and excessively cling to it, we might fail to adjust ourselves to a new stage.

Without fixation to the teachings for the previous stages, we should leave them behind with gratitude and should turn our attention to learn and practice a new teaching for each new stage.

3. Three Kinds of Letters

There are three kinds of people in the world. The first are those who are like letters carved in rock, and they easily give way to anger and retain their angry thoughts for a long time. The second are those who are like letters written in sand, and they give way to anger also, but their angry thoughts quickly pass away. The third are those who are like letters written on running water, and they do not retain their passing thoughts. They let abuse and uncomfortable gossip pass by unnoticed, and their minds are always pure and undisturbed.

Aṅguttara Nikāya

CHOOSING NOT TO GET ANGRY

It is generally thought that anger is one of the natural feelings of humans and therefore it is taken as a matter of course that we get angry at what deserves anger.

This seems too obvious for us to question, as if we have no choice but to get angry from the outset.

On the other hand, we are all swayed by anger. We often get angry at trifles and, after all, get fed up with ourselves. Though wishing to control anger somehow, we have difficulties doing so. Some people say, "Anger is unavoidable because we are human, and humans get angry." Some others would go even further to say, "We are human because we have anger. Without it we are not human." Those people have only one stereotype about human nature as being prone to anger.

The above parable of the three kinds of letters provides us three models of being human.

A man like a letter engraved on a rock means a man whose anger does not disappear any more than does a letter carved on the rock. A man like a letter inscribed on sand signifies a man whose anger disappears quickly, just like a

letter on the sand. A man like a letter written on the surface of water symbolizes a man who does not get angry from the outset.

If we observe carefully, we will notice that not everyone gets angry in the same way in the same situation. Upon being bullied, there are some who get angry and some who do not.

To say, "We cannot help getting angry because we are human," is an excuse for those who do not know the other ways of being human.

4. Parable of an Old Well

Here is another allegory. A man who committed a crime is running away. Some guards are following him, so he tries to hide himself by descending into a well by means of some vines growing down the sides. As he descends, he sees vipers at the bottom of the well, so he decides to cling to the vine for safety. After a while his arms get tired, and he notices two mice, one white and the other black, gnawing at the vine.

If the vine breaks, he will fall to the vipers and perish. Suddenly, on looking upward, he notices just above his face a beehive from which occasionally falls a drop of honey. The man, forgetting all his danger, tastes the honey with delight.

"A man" means one who is born to suffer and die alone. "Guards" and "vipers" refer to the body with all its desires. "Vines" refer to the continuity of human life. "Two mice, one white and the other black" indicate fleeting time, days and nights, and the passing years. "Honey" indicates the physical pleasures that lure suffering beings into the passing years.

Sūtra of a Parable

EVEN IN AN EXTREME SITUATION, HUMANS ARE ATTACHED TO DESIRE.

This parable of the old well skillfully portrays the essence of being human. We are so foolish that we tend to forget our predicaments by tasting sweet honey, no matter how extreme the situation surrounding us might be.

The great Russian writer, Leo Tolstoy, introduced this parable as an old Asian fable in his “*A Confession*,” in which he confessed that honey did not taste sweet any more when he came to face his own death. It is because he painfully understood that life is limited, and death is unavoidable.

What this parable teaches us is that our life tends to be like this. The guards and poisonous snake imply the “results of being driven by lust.” That the wisteria vine was being chewed by the two mice symbolizes our “limited life.” The white and black mice signify “day time and night time,” and the ephemeral sweetness of the honey is the “lust in front of us,” while the wisteria vine is none other than “human life.”

Our life is frail. If we cling to temporary pleasures before us, we will ruin ourselves.

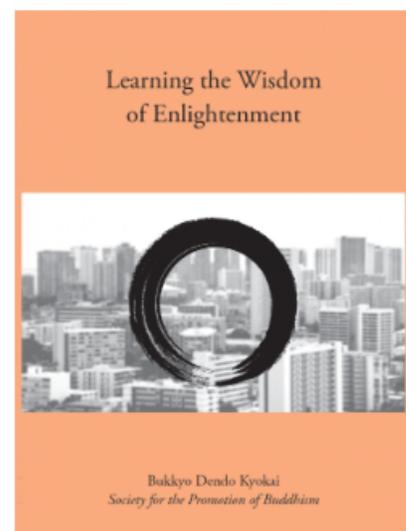
In our given life, time is limited. We all have to die and cannot bring back time. Realizing the importance of cultivating our minds, we should not waste our lives by being enslaved by desire. Let us live our limited lives without regret.

Excerpt from

Learning the Wisdom of Enlightenment

Bukkyo Dendo Kyokai (BDK)
The Society for the Promotion of Buddhism

Copyright © 2019 by Bukkyo Dendo Kyokai and BDK America
ISBN 978-1-886439-72-6



BUDDHA'S PARABLES

Published by

BDK America

1675 School Street Moraga, CA 94556 www.bdkamerica.org

This book is published in cooperation with BDK Japan

3-14 Shiba 4-chome

Minato-ku, Tokyo

Free download:

<https://bdkamerica.org/product/learning-the-wisdom-of-enlightenment/>