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TWO BUDDHIST PARABLES

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BUDDHIST PUBLICATION SOCIETY



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by

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These two Parables are adapted from the Discourses of the Buddha included in the 'Collection of the Kindred Sayings' (Saṃyutta Nikāya). They occur in the Discourses 197 (Asivisopama Sutta) and 200 (Darukkhandhopama Sutta) respectively of the Salāyatana Saṃyutta. An English translation of the complete 'Collection of the Kindred Sayings' (5 vols.) has been published by the Pali Text Society, 30, Dawson Street, London W. 2.

TWO BUDDHIST PARABLES

The Parable of the Serpents

A man who abhors death and desires a long life is offered the charge of four irritable, dreadfully venomous serpents, his duty being to wake up those horrible snakes from time to time, wash them, feed them and then put them back to sleep. He is warned that these snakes are so deadly venomous that one bite would make him die after suffering the most excruciating pain. The man being at liberty to accept or refuse the post flees from the serpents.

While fleeing, the man is warned that five murderous enemies constantly follow him to take his life as soon as they seize him. He flees all the faster, especially on hearing that a sixth foe, a robber chief with his sword drawn, is behind his back to chop off his head.

This poor man, who endeavours to escape the four dreadful serpents, the five murderous enemies, and the robber chief with drawn sword, reaches a village where he hopes to find shelter.

To his grief, however, he finds the village deserted, houses all vacant and all containers and vessels in the rooms empty.

While he is examining the place, he sees a band of robbers entering this abandoned village for plunder. Seized with fear he flees again, and finds himself on the bank of a broad river.

He sees no bridge, no ferry or boat, not even a raft to cross the vast mass of water; but knowing well that the opposite bank is the safe and the sole refuge for his plight, he gathers pieces of timber, sticks, bulrushes, creepers, leaves and some resin, and with these makes a raft. Paddling it with both his hands and feet, he crosses the river and lands safely on the further bank freed from fear and pain.

* * *

The meaning of this parable is as follows: 'The Four Venomous Serpents' signify the four primary qualities of matter, especially of our body: the elements of solidity, cohesion, caloricity and vibration, popularly called earth, water, fire and wind (paṭhavī, āpo, tejo, vāyo).

'The Five Murderous Enemies' are the Five Aggregates (khandha) into which the Buddha has grouped all physical and mental processes constituting a so-called personality, in fact, all sentient life. These five are: 1. corporeality, 2. feeling, 3. perception, 4. volitional activities and other mental processes, 5. all kinds of cognition or consciousness.

'The Deserted Village' stands for the six subjective bases (ajjhattika, āyatana) of conscious life: the five sense organs, and mind in all its aspects as the sixth. For when a wise man examines any of these organs, he finds but emptiness, no

trace of an enduring substrate or spiritual essence, a soul or anything he might call his own, his self or ego.

‘The village-plundering robbers’ in the parable are the external bases (*bahirāyatana*) of our conscious life, i.e. the objects of cognition, such as visible forms, sounds, odours, tastes, objects of bodily contact and the objects of our thinking. The Subjective Bases (that is, the sense organs with mind as the sixth) are, as it were, overpowered by the various external objects, be they pleasant or unpleasant; and, therefore, these external bases, the six objects, have been compared to plundering robbers.

‘The robber chief with drawn sword’ signifies enjoyment and lust (*nandi-rāga*) which are synonymous with craving (*taṇhā*), the cause of suffering. If the ‘plunderers’, the six objects, are led on by Craving, they become a real menace

‘The vast area of waters’ is an expression for the four Floods (*ogha*), as they are called in Buddhist doctrine, that is: the craving for sense pleasures, the craving for life, the attachment to theories and wrong views, and the attachment to the state of ignorance or delusion about the true nature of all life.

‘This shore’ that is so fraught with dangers, refers to the so-called personality placed in this world of suffering and being a part of it.

‘The yonder shore’, the safe refuge, is Nibbāna.

‘The raft’, the vehicle for successfully crossing over to the

other shore, is the Noble Eightfold Path, the core of the Buddha's Teaching with its three great divisions of morality, concentration and insight.

'The exertion with hands and feet' is the application of energy for the attainment of the goal. The crossing of the river and setting one's foot on the other shore signifies final liberation or deliverance, the attainment of perfect purity, holiness or arahantship, the realization of the goal as proclaimed by the Enlightened One.

In this parable of the serpents we have the essence of Buddhist philosophy which, when rightly understood, leads on to its practical application; and this application means detachment from the things of the world and effort for liberation.

Do you know what it means to apply this philosophy in our daily life? If we regard our body and all corporeal things as venomous serpents, we shall not envy others their more attractive bodily appearance nor be dejected if we are less handsome. We shall not spend too much time in tending our bodily form; and we shall never hurt others, if we know that they and we are similarly conditioned, being endowed with frail bodies and sensitive minds. The putting into practice of that new philosophy implies that, to the best of our capacity, we should aid others in their escape from suffering; and though we shall not crave for the possession of more 'serpents' to tend, we shall assist all near us in their material and spiritual needs, and point out to them the way

to liberation.

What is most needed for the practical application of our new outlook on life is either a systematic study and training in the discipline, or a sudden insight into the true nature of life. This insight or effortless pure awareness may at times be so powerful that the 'flood' is crossed in a single moment or a series of such moments that may come all of a sudden. This Intuitive Insight, however, is the result of the cumulative effect of past training, study, complete detachment in moments of contemplation, and of merit acquired in former lives.

We have to create conditions favourable to this final realization, by repeated efforts in leading a life in conformity with our norm of conduct, the Philosophy of Life of the Enlightened One. We ought to be constantly mindful, especially in crucial situations of our life, of the dangers in being wholly addicted to the pursuit of worldly pleasures, honour, reputation, fame or power. We must sublimate our 'will to power' into a selfless 'will to community'. With a conduct ennobled and alive to the true nature of things, we can extend our good-will to all, irrespective of caste, creed or race, friend or foe, and be ready to aid all in the crossing of the Flood of worldliness and passions.

The best moments of our daily life must be devoted to the cultivation of this vision of, or insight into, the true nature of our life and the possibility of liberation. Progress in

detachment from life makes the bliss of the 'Yonder Shore' more and more real, until it becomes the sole reality worth striving for. What at first had appeared a dreamy vision becomes a reality to those who seriously and continually strive and exert themselves in the practical application of this philosophy of life.

For fixing firmly in your minds this philosophy a second parable may be added.

The Parable of the log

Once the Blessed One sojourned at Kosambi on the bank of the river Ganges. There the Master saw a big piece of wood floating in the river, and seeing it, he pointed out the log to his disciples, and said :

“If this piece of wood is driven neither to this bank nor the opposite bank, does not sink in the middle of the stream, is neither cast upon dry land nor seized either by men or spirits, and is neither drawn down to the bottom by a whirlpool, nor becomes rotten and decayed within, then this log will be carried onward to the sea, for the course of the river Ganges is directed towards the sea. Even so, disciples, if you do not allow yourselves to be driven on to either bank; nor sink in the middle of the stream; nor be cast upon dry land; nor are seized by men or spirits; nor drawn down by a whirlpool, nor suffer corruption within, then your course will be directed towards Nibbāna, you shall reach liberation—for Right Understanding leads on to Deliverance.”

On hearing these words a disciple addresses the Master: “Venerable One, what is the import of this simile?” And the Teacher replied:

“‘This bank’ means the six subjective bases of our mental

life: the five physical senses, and mind as the sixth. 'The opposite bank' refers to the six external or objective bases, that is to say, the five sense objects and mind objects.

'The sinking in the middle of the stream' refers to one's being engulfed by the pleasures of the senses. 'To be cast upon dry land' points to that obstacle of progress which consists in pride and conceit.

'To be seized by men' is to spend all one's time in society, being engrossed with everything else but one's own development. 'To be seized by spirits' means living a virtuous or religious life chiefly in the hope of being born, as a result of one's merit, in a heavenly world, as a 'deva', a divine being.

'To be drawn down by a whirlpool' signifies the attachment to the pursuit of worldly pleasures: rushing from one entertainment to another, being swallowed by the whirlpool of lust and worldliness, with no thought of the greater issues of life.

'Inner corruption' denotes vice, immorality, inner impurity, dubious conduct, hypocrisy, pretending to be good and virtuous while full of inner corruption."

* * *

This second parable, too, is a very impressive illustration of the Buddhist philosophy of life. It points out to us what the aim of the true follower of the Enlightened One ought to be: we must neither spend our entire leisure time in tending our

body and filling our mind with worthless reading or frivolous conversation nor give ourselves entirely up to the pursuit of worldly pleasures and mere intellectual pastimes. We should not allow any conceit to come into our minds, for there is little in us or about us to be proud of.

Neither ought to we spend all our leisure in the company of worldly-minded people, but ought to set apart a good portion of our free hours for a sane pursuit of wisdom and virtue, always seeking the company of those who are more advanced in the culture of the mind. We must devote some of our leisure to the study of books of wisdom and contemplation. And in order to deserve the name of 'disciples of the Enlightened One,' we should not live this life of purity and discipline for the sake of heavenly bliss, as many unenlightened worldlings do; but we should keep firmly before our mind the final goal of Enlightenment, and our determination to make definite progress towards it in this very life.

For such a progress and an adequate grasp of the Buddhist philosophy of life, we must know what the ultimate safety of the 'Yonder Shore', or Nibbāna, implies: It is first of all the eradication of the three Root Evils, Greed, Hatred and Delusion. Though we cannot realize the full implications of the Yonder Shore while being still bound to 'this shore', we may, however, catch a glimpse of it when listening attentively to the solemn declaration of the Buddha:

"There is, disciples, an Unborn, an Unoriginated, Uncreated,

Unformed. If there were not this Unborn, Unoriginated, Uncreated, Unformed, an escape from the world of the born, the originated, the created, the formed would not be possible. But since there is an Unborn, an Unoriginated, Uncreated, Unformed, therefore is escape possible from the world of the born, the originated, the created, the formed”.

Our conception of the Buddha’s Doctrine will not be complete if we neglect this second half of his teachings which concerns the Yonder Shore, the aspect of Deliverance or Nibbāna. We must bear in mind that the whole of the Buddha’s doctrine comprises both ‘shores’, as he expressly declared:

“These two things only do I teach now as before: suffering as well as the liberation from suffering”.

If we often reflect on the Buddhist philosophy of life and its practical application, as outlined in these two Parables, we shall bear with courage the unavoidable vicissitudes of life, and live righteously with goodwill and amity to all fellow beings. We shall lead a life of happiness and progress towards the final goal of Deliverance.

May we all strive to attain to this Deliverance of Heart and Mind, to Enlightenment, to the Peace of Nibbāna!

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