

The Parable Sutra

(Taisho Tripitaka 217)

Translated into Chinese by Yi-Tzing
Translated into English by Charles Patton

Thus have I heard: Once upon a time, the Bhagavan was staying in the Jetavana grove near Shravasti City.

Then the Bhagavan was among a great congregation and addressed the King named Brilliance, "Maha-rajā, I will now for your majesty briefly discuss a parable about the beings of samsara and their feelings, clingings, mistakes and troubles. Your majesty should now listen closely and well think about it.

"Going back in the past an asamkhyeya-kalpa, there was a person who went into the wilderness and was chased by an evil elephant. Fearfully, he fled without any refuge. Then he saw an empty well. And dangling into it was a tree root. Thereupon, he quickly went down the root and hid himself in the well. There were two rats, dark and light, that together gnawed the tree root above him. And in the well, its sides had four poisonous snakes that desired to bite that person. And below there was a poisonous serpent. His mind was terrified by the snakes and the serpent and he was apprehensive about the tree root breaking. The tree roots had in them the honey of bees, five drops of which fell into his mouth. When the tree shook, bees swarmed down to sting the person. And brush fires came repeatedly to burn the tree.

The king said, "How is it that this person should undergo such endless distress, craving so little feeling?"

Then the Bhagavan addressed the great king, "The wilderness is a metaphor for that long night under ignorance that is vast and distant. The words 'that person' is a metaphor for a being in yet another life. The elephant is a metaphor for impermanence. The well is a metaphor for samsara. The dangerous crossing of the tree roots is a metaphor for life. The dark and light pair of rats is metaphor for day and night. Them gnawing the tree root is a metaphor for being in the four elements. The honey is a metaphor for the five desires and the bees are a metaphor for false thinking. The fire is a metaphor for old age and illness. And the poisonous serpent is a metaphor for death.

"This is why, maha-rajā, you should think that birth, old age-illness-and-death are quite terrible. Always should you think and be mindful of them. Do not make yourself subject to the slavery of the five desires."

Thereupon the Bhagavan gravely spoke a gatha.

"The wilderness is the path of ignorance,
The person fleeing is a metaphor for the ordinary man,
The great elephant is a simile for impermanence,
And the well is a metaphor for the shore of samsara.

The tree roots are a metaphor for being in this life,
The two rats are the same as night and day,
The gnawed root is the decay of thought upon thought,
And the four snakes are the same as the four elements (earth, fire, water, wind.)

The dripping honey is a metaphor for the five desires (taste, touch, smell etc)
The bee stings a simile for false thinking
The fire is the same as having old age and illness
And the poisonous serpent is the way to the suffering of death.

The wise regard these matters thusly:
The elephant can weary a being's crossing
The five desires can lead the mind to detachment
And the way is called the liberated person.

An oppressive place is the ocean of ignorance
Always is death the ruler chasing us.
One must know that the love of sound and form
Is not pleasant when they leave the ordinary man (prthagjana)."

Then the maha-raj Brilliance heard the Buddha give this talk on birth and death being a passage through troubles and attained an unprecedentedly deep birth of disillusionment. With his palms together reverently and single-mindedly gazing respectfully he said to the Buddha: "Bhagavan, it is greatly compassionate of the Tathagata to give a talk on such a subtle and wondrous meaning of the Dharma. I am now crowned! (consecrated)"

The Buddha said: "Sadhu! Sadhu! (Bravo, bravo). Maharaja, you should practice this as it has been propounded and not go about unrestrained."

Then King Brilliance and those of the great congregation were all elated. They faithfully received, transmitted and upheld it.

(End of the Sutra)

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