

Stories - The Sky Is Falling

May 11, 2021

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Jataka, Buddha, rabbit, tree, mango, deer, rhinoceroses, elephants, cliff, lion, investigate, source, stop, information

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Good day, everyone. This week, I am telling Buddhist stories. They contain wonderful teachings and messages. Some are wisdom fables, like Aesop's fables.

I am fond of one story partly because I have taught it a lot to children. I sometimes have them act it out with a lot of running around and yelling. I will tell this story, but please do not take it as just for children. Some of these stories have tremendous value. I think this one, in particular, applies to a lot of the fake news, fear, and anger that has been happening in the United States.

It is one of the Jataka tales, the classic canonical stories purported to be the past life stories of the Buddha when he was an animal. He is the wise animal in the stories.

In this story, there is a rabbit. The rabbit is not the Buddha – the Buddha is coming. It is the middle of a nice, comfortable day, and the rabbit decides to take a nap underneath a tree. Soon he is contentedly sleeping. Everything is fine in the universe. Suddenly, something large falls on the ground right next to the rabbit. Clunk! Boom! Bang! He wakes up with a jolt and concludes that the sky is falling.

The rabbit jumps up and runs around yelling: "The sky is falling! The sky is falling!" He comes across other rabbits. The other rabbits ask, "Why are you running?" The rabbit replies, "Run, run – because the sky is falling!" So the other rabbits join him. They run into more rabbits, and the same thing happens again. Soon more rabbits are running, and they are all yelling: "The sky is falling! The sky is falling!"

The rabbits come across a group of deer, and the deer ask, "What are you doing?" The rabbits reply: "The sky is falling! Run. Run." First, one deer begins to run, and then the whole herd begins running. They are all yelling: "The sky is falling! The sky is falling!"

The animals go along further and come across rhinoceroses. The rhinoceroses ask, "What are you doing?" The animals reply: "Well, the sky is falling! You have to run! Run for safety!" So first one rhinoceros runs, and then many rhinoceroses run. By this time, the ground is shaking because of the weight of all the animals running, afraid of the falling sky.

The animals come across elephants. Pretty soon there is a huge herd of elephants, pounding and shaking the ground. Everyone is yelling frantically: "The sky is falling! The sky is falling!"

Now the animals are heading to a big cliff. They are beside themselves with fear because they do not know where they are going. But they are heading toward a cliff, and they are all going to fall right off.

Towering above the cliff, on the top of a mountain, is a great lion. The lion in this story is the Buddha. The lion looks down and sees what is going on. He sees the danger that all the animals are in. So, with a giant leap, the lion leaps down in front of the charging animals and roars, "Stop!" All the animals screech to a halt in front of the lion.

The lion asks calmly, "What is going on here?" The elephant replies: "Well, the sky is falling! The sky is falling!" The lion asks, "Well, who told you that?" The elephant says, "Well, the rhinoceroses told me that." So the lion asks the rhinoceroses, "Who told you that?" The rhinoceroses reply, "Well, the deer told me that."

The lion then asks the deer, and the deer reply, "The rabbits." The lion asks the rabbits, and the rabbits all turn

around and point to the first rabbit saying, “That’s the one who told us.” So the lion asks the first rabbit, “Where did you get the idea that the sky is falling?” The first rabbit replies, “Well, there was this loud bang, and something fell right next to me.” And the lion says, “Well, take us there.”

With some trepidation, the rabbit leads the whole large gathering of animals and the lion back to the tree, which happened to be a mango tree. And lying on the ground next to where the rabbit had napped is a mango. It was a mango that had fallen off the tree and landed right next to the rabbit’s head. So the lion points this out, saying: “There’s no sky falling. It is just a mango.” So everyone relaxes and goes back to their different activities.

This story is about not running from what we are afraid of. It is about taking a good look to investigate: What is really happening here? Ask yourself this very important question: Where have I learned this information – some rumor, some idea? What is the source of this information? And then, what is the source of that information?

The idea is to understand the source of our information. Is it just our opinion, like it was for the rabbit? Is it a wild guess or a rumor? Is it what we have heard from someone else? We don’t really know for ourselves, but we have heard: “Oh, I’ve heard a story. This is how it is out there.”

And then, what happens if fear or anger is triggered? If it is something we have seen directly, it might be reasonable. But if it is many steps removed from the original, are we not becoming like the herd of animals running toward a cliff? Are we not starting to create realities – world views, understandings, enemies, scenarios, and doomsday ideas, which we are running from and are preoccupied with – so that we lose our sensibilities?

Who is going to be the lion who stops us? The lion who says: “Stop! Let’s go back and take a good look or investigate what is really happening here. Let’s follow the steps back.”

There is probably not going to be a lion or a Buddha who is going to jump in front of us. But the Buddha, for us, represents our capacity to say, “Stop.” It is a healthy stopping – stopping us from running away, running in circles, and spinning out. Really stop – and turn and look at what is happening. Turn and look towards the danger or the fear if it is appropriate to look at it.

Courage is needed in Buddhist practice to stop and look at what we are afraid of. To stop and look at what we are angry at. To really look. What is going on here? What is the real source of my reactivity?

Recently, I was mildly angry with someone. It was an annoyance or an irritation. I stopped to take a look at it. I realized very quickly that a huge percentage of the irritation or annoyance was the stories I was making up about the situation, not about the actual situation. I did not have all the information about what was happening. I was guessing, and in guessing, I was making a picture of what it was. Then I was reacting to my picture, not to the person. I realized: “Oh. It is not the other person I have to contend with. I have to contend with myself.” So I stopped, looked, and saw, “Where is it?” And I found it in myself.

You have the ability to stop. You have the ability to turn, look and see what is really the source of an idea. Where is the beginning of it? Maybe it was just a mango that fell on the ground.

To support the ability to stop and take a good look, you have breathing. Cultivate the habit of coming back and breathing with the situation. Not to deny or turn away from anything, but breathing consciously gives us patience. It gives us breathing room or space for the mind to look, investigate and see what is really going on. We do not have that if we are caught up in the animals of our mind, spreading rumors to each other, spinning out, with the whole zoo of our mind starting to race and run toward a cliff. Stop. Take a look.

So, the sky is falling. If you think that is the case, stop and take a good look at where that idea came from. Maybe you will find instead that there is a sweet, ripe mango waiting for you. Some treasure, a sweetness, something delicious and wonderful is waiting for you if you really look deeply at the situation, including yourself.

Thank you, and we will continue storytelling tomorrow.