

Stories - The Parrot and the Fire

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Good morning and good day to all of you. I want to start by expressing gratitude to my friends, Paul Haller and Fu Schroeder, for teaching the last two weeks. I was delighted to listen to their wonderful teachings. Partly because of the last two weeks, I feel a little hesitant to offer new teachings in the mode that I have been in the last year. So I thought that it would be a nice transition for me to tell some Buddhist stories. I remember that Fu, in particular, is very fond of stories.

In the religious studies field, there is a theory that for most religions, stories are more important than doctrine. Most people take in the stories of their religion. Stories evoke their imagination. They provide examples and guidance for how to live. I do not know how true that theory is universally, but it is interesting. Certainly, stories are important.

The first story I want to tell may be poignant for California these days, where we have a lot of wildfires. Already this early in the season, we have more wildfires than we did last year. We will see what happens the rest of the year.

Jataka tales are stories native to ancient India. They are like Aesop's fables. They usually have to do with animals. One main character turns out to be the Buddha in a previous life. He may be developing himself to become the Buddha sometime in the future.

This story involves a parrot and a great forest fire, which sweeps through the jungle. Being a bird, the parrot can easily outfly the fire and come to safety. But as the little parrot flies away, it sees below all these animals running through the jungle to get away from the approaching fire. However, the animals are coming to a great lake, and it looks like they will become trapped. Many of the animals cannot swim. They are stuck between the approaching fire that could burn them and the lake where they could drown.

The little parrot says: "I have to do something. I cannot let this continue the way it is." So the parrot dives into the lake to wet its little wings. Then the parrot flies over the hottest part of the fire, flaps its wings, and sprinkles little drops of water onto the fire. The parrot does that over and over again, back and forth, back and forth. But it does not have any effect on the fire. Only a few drops come down, and they probably evaporate before hitting the fire. Nonetheless, the parrot keeps doing it.

The parrot's great dedication, sacrifice, and virtue has an impact on the unseen world of ancient India. The throne of the great god Brahma heats up. (Brahma – or Sokka, depending on how he is named – is like Zeus in the pantheon of ancient Indian gods.) Apparently, that is a phenomenon in the unseen world. When someone on earth is being very virtuous, it heats the throne of the great god. So the great god turns into a great eagle to see for himself what is happening. He flies down and sees what the parrot is trying to do.

The great god flies to the parrot and says: "You know, this is ridiculous. It does not make any sense for you to be doing what you are doing. No matter how many times you sprinkle drops of water onto the fire, you are not going to extinguish it. You are not going to save your friends. What you are doing does not make any sense." The parrot says: "If not me, then who? If I keep doing it, maybe I don't know what the consequences are. I don't know what will happen. But this is what I have to do."

Seeing the parrot's steadfastness, courage, and dedication to helping others – no matter how seemingly pointless – moves the great god tremendously. Inspired by that, the great god creates a massive rainstorm that quickly puts out the fire and saves all the animals. Then the parrot says: "Yes. Do you see? You never quite know. I could not quite know what effect my efforts were going to make. But you see? They worked."

In this story, I like the idea of the naturalness with which the parrot helps others. The parrot's whole being is dedicated to doing that. It is like parental care. Some parents would do the same for their children. They would do whatever it took. They would sacrifice themselves for the life of their child. There is something almost natural in parents caring for their kids.

You see that in the natural world as well. Many animals care for their young, sometimes at tremendous sacrifice. They protect their young from predators and anything else with a dedication and willingness to die if necessary. Exactly what the nature of that parental dedication and care is – I do not know. But when it occurs, it has a kind of naturalness.

So the parrot was simply acting on its natural instincts. Its naturally good heart was not limited by a small sense of self, constructed by me, myself, and mine: "What's in it for me? Will people like me if I do this? Will I be praised?" Or, "I have to do this so that I avoid condemnation or people thinking badly of me for abandoning my friends." These are calculations and concerns of self that are a contraction, constriction, a limiting factor to how people can live their lives.

There are all these stories we live in – imagined stories, stories that predict the future and what this all means. When all the stories can fall away (which is partly the function of meditation), we tap into something very different. We tap into a very different orientation, set of values, and way of being in the world that is not limited by conceit, ideas of "should" and "shouldn't" – or even ideas of obligation and what we are supposed to do.

The parrot was not living under some duty-bound rule that it was supposed to save other beings. But I think of it as the natural movement of a good heart. And then, we do not know what the unseen world will do. We do not know what the effects are going to be – the impact we have.

Sometimes people do a small act that has a huge impact and changes the world. The seventeen-year-old who filmed George Floyd's murder had no idea that she was doing anything other than trying to record it – to have justice by recording what she saw. But her small action had a huge impact on the nation and the world. So we never know. And maybe we shouldn't know the impact we have.

I will end with one short story that comes from the Sufi tradition. A genie went to a Sufi and said: "I will grant you two wishes. And what will those wishes be? You can have anything you want." The Sufi said: "Wherever I go, I want to benefit people. But I don't want to know that I'm doing it."

So the genie gave the Sufi a big bag to carry. Imagine a special bag filled with seeds of all kinds of wonderfully beneficial plants. And the bag had a little hole in the back. As the Sufi walked along carrying the bag, the seeds fell out of the bag onto the ground. They then sprouted and created new plants. And because that happened behind the Sufi, he never got to know how he benefited all the people behind him with growing plants, forests, and trees.

Who knows how the unseen world responds to our goodness and care, which comes not from obligation but the awakened goodness in our hearts?

May we all be parrots. Thank you.