

The Hundred Parables Sutra

Boiled Molasses

Once upon a time, a stupid man was boiling molasses. When a rich man came to his house, he wanted to give some of the molasses to the rich man. He poured a bit of water into the pot of molasses and put it over a fire, and then he used a fan to fan the molasses, trying to cool it. A bystander asked him, "If you don't put out the fire below, how could the molasses cool down even if you keep on fanning it?" People began to laugh at this man. This is just like externalists who do not bother to extinguish the fire of afflictions. They delve into ascetic practices such as lying down on thorns and brambles, or scorching the five parts of their bodies, in hope of attaining the path of clear coolness and quiescence. They will never get anywhere. They are laughed at by the wise, who think them strange. In their present lives, they undergo suffering; in the future, they still have to undergo the pain of revolving in the wheel.

Sharpening the Knife Upstairs

Once there was a poor man who worked for the king. After months had passed, his body became thin and emaciated. Out of pity for him, the king gave him a dead camel. The poor man immediately started to flay the camel. Finding his knife too blunt, he went about looking for a whetstone to grind it. He found one upstairs. After he had sharpened his knife, he came downstairs to skin the camel. This he did repeatedly, running up and down the stairs, to sharpen his knife. The process became so toilsome that he couldn't manage to go up and down the stairs any more. He ended up dragging the entire carcass of the camel up the stairs, so he could sharpen his knife next to it. Everybody laughed at him.

This person's behavior is like that of deluded people who break the precepts, and who expend plenty of money to cultivate blessings in hope of being reborn in the heaven. These people are like the man, who, because he liked to sharpen his knife, dragged the entire camel upstairs. The effort was tedious; but the results were minimal .

The King Was Said to Have Been Recklessly Cruel

In the past, when a certain person was talking about the king's faults, he remarked, "The king is despotic and unreasonable!" When those words got back to the king's ears, he was beside himself with rage. Without finding out exactly who had said it, he believed in the words of a deceitful attendant and put a worthy minister under arrest. He issued an order to have the minister's back flayed and a hundred ounces of his flesh hacked from his body.

Shortly thereafter, someone testified to the minister's innocence. Then the king, feeling remorseful, sent the minister a thousand ounces of flesh to make up for what was cut off from his body. But the minister was wracked with pain and cried out in the night.

The king heard his moans and asked him, "What's wrong with you? I took a hundred ounces of your flesh, but gave you back ten times the amount. Aren't you satisfied? Why are you still groaning?"

A bystander observed, "Your Majesty, if you were to cut off the head of your own son, even if you were to make up for the loss with a thousand heads, still, your son could not escape the way of death. Although this minister has been given back ten times the flesh he has lost, still, he cannot be spared from pain."

A stupid person is the same way. Having no fear of future lives, he greedily craves pleasures of the present. He torments the people around him and extorts much wealth from the citizens, hoping in this way to eradicate his own sins and reap blessings and rewards. This is like the king who flayed the minister's back, cut off his flesh, and then tried to make it up to him by giving him back some flesh. It is impossible to allay the pain in this way.