
[Kishlansky Introduction] In the eighth century CE, a new form of Buddhism spread from China to Japan. It was known as the Tendai sect and it derived its inspiration from a series of Sanskrit texts that focused on the Lotus Sutra, regarded by the Tendai as the final and most authentic teaching of the Buddha. The Tendai sect was established in Japan by Siacho (767-822) who had made several missions to China and was permitted to remain there in search of Buddhist texts. On his return Siacho was given imperial permission to found a new Buddhist sect on Mt. Hiei based on the teaching of the Lotus Sutra.

The use of parables was one of the favorite methods of Tendai teaching. The Parable of the Burning House, which is a part of the otus of the Wonderful Law is designed to show the superiority of the single sutra (that of the Lotus) over traditional Buddhist teaching of the equal power of the three sutras. Tendai Buddhists believed that all humans could be redeemed and reach universal enlightenment.

A PARABLE OF THE BURNING HOUSE

Let us suppose the following case, Sariputra....There was a certain housekeeper, old, aged, decrepit, very advanced in years, rich, wealthy, opulent; he had a great house, high, spacious, built a long time ago and old, inhabited by some two, three, four, or five hundred living beings. The house had but one door, and a thatch; its terraces were tottering, the bases of its pillars rot-ten, the coverings and plaster of the walls loose. On a sudden the whole house was from every side put in conflagration by a mass of fire. Let us suppose that the man had many little boys, say five, or ten, or even twenty, and that he himself had come out of the house.
Now, Sariputra, that man, on seeing the house from every side wrapt in a blaze by a great mass of fire, got afraid, and...calls to the boys: "Come, my children; the house is burning with a mass of fire; come, lest you be burnt in the mass fire, and come to grief and disaster." But the ignorant boys do not heed the words of him who is their well-wisher; they are not afraid nor know the purport of the word "burning"; they run hither and thither, walk about, and repeatedly look at their father; all, because they are so ignorant.

The man has a clear perception of their inclinations. Now these boys happen to have many and manifold toys to play with, pretty, nice, pleasant, dear, amusing, and precious. The man, knowing the disposition of the boys, says to them: "My children, your toys, which you are so loath to miss, which are so various and multifarious, [such as] bullock-carts, goat-carts, deer-carts, which are so pretty, nice, dear, and precious to you, have all been put by me outside the house-door for you to play with. Come, run our, leave the house; to each of you I shall give what he wants. Come soon, come out for the sake of these toys." And the boys, on hearing the names mentioned of such playthings as they like and desire, quickly rush out from the burning house, with eager effort and great alacrity, one having no time to wait for the other, and pushing each other on the cry of "Who shall arrive first, the very first?"

The man, seeing that his children have safely and happily escaped, goes and sits down in the open air on the square of the village, his heart is filled with joy and delight. The boys go up to the place where their father is sitting, and say: "Father, give us those toys to play with, those bullock-carts, and deer-carts." Then, Sariputra, the man gives to his sons, who run swift as the wind, bullock-carts only, made of seven precious substances, provided with benches, hung with a multitude of small bells, lofty, adorned with rare and wonderful jewels, embellished with jewel wreaths, decorated with garlands of flowers, carpeted with cotton mattresses and woolen coverlets, covered with white cloth and silk, having on both sides easy cushions, yoked with white, very fair and fleet bullocks, led by a multitude of men. To each of his children he gives several bullock-carts of one appearance and kind, provided with flags, and swift as wind. That man does so, Sariputra because being rich,... he rightly thinks: Why should I give these boys inferior carts, all these boys being my own children, dear and precious? I have such great vehicles, and ought to treat all the boys equally and without partiality. As I won many treasures and granaries, I could give such great vehicles to all beings, how much more then to my own children," Meanwhile the boys are mounting the vehicles with feelings of astonishment and wonder. Now, Sariputra, what is thy opinion? Has that man made himself guilty of a falsehood by first holding out to his children the prospect of three vehicles and afterwards going to each of them the greatest vehicles only, the most...
magnificent vehicle? Sariputra answered: By no means, Lord. That is not sufficient to
qualify the man as a speaker of falsehood, since it only was a
skilful device to persuade his children to go out of the burning house and save their
lives. Nay, besides recovering their very bodies, O Lord, they have
received all those toys. If that man, O Lord, had given no single cart, even then he
would not have been a speaker of falsehood, for he had previously
been meditating on saving the little boys from a great mas of pain by some able
device.

The venerable Sariputra having thus spoken, the Lord said to him: Very well,
Sariputra, quite so; it is even as you say. So too, Sariputra, the Tathagata
is free from all dangers, wholly exempt from all misfortune, despondency, calamity,
pain, grief, the thick enveloping dark mists of ignorance. He, the
Tathagata, endowed with Buddha-knowledge, forces, absence of hesitation,
uncommon properties, and mighty by magical power, is the father of the
world, who has reached the highest perfection in the knowledge of skilful means, who
is most merciful, long-suffering, benevolent, compassionate. He
appears in this triple world, which is like a house the roof and shelter whereof are
decayed, [a house] burning by a mass of misery,. Once born, he
sees how the creatures are burnt, tormented, vexed, distressed by birth, old age,
disease, death, grief, wailing, pain, melancholy, despondency; how
for the sake of enjoyment, and prompted by sensual desires, they severally suffer
various pains. In consequence both of what in this world they are
seeking and what they have acquired, they will in a future state suffer various pains, in
hell, in the brute creation, in the realm of Yamaraja (king of the
dead); suffer such pains as poverty in the world of gods or men, union with hateful
persons or things, and separation from the beloved ones. And while
incessantly whirling in that mass of evils they are sporting, playing, diverting
themselves; they do not fear, nor dread, nor are they seized with terror; they
do not know, nor mind; they are not startled, do not try to escape, but are enjoying
themselves in that triple world which is like unto a burning house,
and run hither and thither. Though overwhelmed by that mass of evil, they do not
conceive the idea that they must beware of it. Under such
circumstances, Sariputra, the Tathagata reflects thus: "Verify, I am the father of these
beings; I must save them from this mass of evil, and bestow on
them the immense, inconceivable bliss of Buddha-knowledge, wherewith they shall
sport, play, and divert themselves, wherein they shall find their rest.
If, in the conviction of my possessing the power of knowledge and magical faculties. I
manifest to these beings the knowledge, forces and absence of
hesitation of the Tathagata, without availing myself of some device, these beings will
not escape. For they are attached to the pleasures of the five
senses, to worldly pleasure." they will not be freed from birth, old age, disease, death,
grief, wailing, pain, melancholy, despondency, by which they are
burnt, tormented, vexed, distressed. Unless they are forced to leave the triple world
which is like a house the shelter and roof whereof is in a blaze,
how are they to get acquainted with Buddha-knowledge?"
Now, Sariputra, even as that man with powerful arms, without using the strength of his arms, attracts his children out of the burning house by an able device, and afterwards gives them magnificent, great carts, so Sariputra, the Tathagata possessed of knowledge and freedom from all hesitation, without using them, in order to attract the creatures out of the triple world which is like a burning house with decayed roof and shelter, shows, by his knowledge of able devices, three vehicles, viz. the vehicle of the disciples, the vehicle of the pratyeka-buddhas, the vehicle of the bodhisattvas. By means these three vehicles he attracts the creatures and speaks to them thus: "Do not delight in the triple world, which is like a burning house, these miserable forms, sounds, odors, flavors and contacts. For in delighting in this triple world you are burnt, heated, inflamed with thirst inseparable from the pleasures of the five senses. Fly from this triple world; betake yourselves to the three vehicles.... I give you pledge for it, that I shall give you these three vehicles, make an effort to run out of this triple world. And to attract them I say "These vehicles are grand, praised by the Aryas, and provided with most pleasant things; with such you are sport, play, and divert yourselves in a noble manner. You will feel the great delight of the faculties, powers, constituents of Bodhi, meditations, the eight degrees of emancipation, self-concentration, and the results of self-concentration, a you will become greatly happy and cheerful."

Questions

1. Why did Sariputra have to bribe the boys with toys to get them burning house?

2. With what dilemma is Sariputra faced once the boys escaped?

3. What is the Lord's answer?

4. How does the parable prove the superiority of the single sutra?