

## CHAPTER 9 – THE ACROBATS

Every year, or sometimes twice a year, a large group of acrobats traveled to the city of Rajagaha in India to perform for the king for seven days. They earned a lot of gold and money for their performances. People were so amazed by the acrobats' skill that they tossed gifts and money on the acrobats' stage during the whole week. And everyone in the town wanted to see the wonderful performances. They piled up beds one on top of another so they could sit or stand on the beds to see over the big crowd.



One day, an acrobat who was a young woman climbed up a pole, made somersaults on the pole, and then, balancing herself on the tip of the pole, she danced and sang beautifully.

In the audience, standing on top of a pile of beds were two young men who were friends. One, named Uggasena, was the son of a very wealthy merchant. He watched the acrobat dancing and was mesmerized by her skill in moving her hands and feet. He admired the graceful way she danced. He adored her beauty and was totally fascinated by her. He immediately fell in love with her.

After the performance, he went home and told his parents about her. He was so attracted to her and was determined to marry her, but he was sure his parents wouldn't approve of him marrying a girl who was the daughter of an acrobat. Therefore, he said,

"If I can have her, I shall live, but if I cannot have her, I shall die right here."

He flung himself down on his bed and refused to eat when the meal was served.

His father asked him, "Son, what is wrong with you?"

Uggasena replied, "If I can have that acrobat's daughter, I shall live, but if I cannot have her, I shall die right here."

His father said, "Son, don't act this way," and his mother said. "We will bring you another young lady, who is our equal in society and wealth."

Uggasena, still lying in his bed, repeated, "If I can have that acrobat's daughter, I shall live, but if I cannot have her, I shall die right here."

His father argued with him for a long time, trying to persuade him that he should wait, that a traveling acrobat is not a proper wife for him, and that there are beautiful young ladies from more respectable families whom he could marry. But he couldn't make his son see the attraction to the young acrobat from a wise perspective. Uggasena could not be convinced to let go of his obsession with her.

Finally, the father sent someone to bring Uggasena's friend to the house. When the friend arrived, Uggasena's father gave him a thousand pieces of money, saying,

"Tell the acrobat to take this money and give his daughter to my son."

Uggasena's friend went to the acrobat and asked him to accept the bag of money in exchange for permission for his daughter to be married to Uggasena.

The acrobat replied, "I will not give my daughter for money. But, if it is true that he cannot live without my daughter, then let him travel around with us. If he will do this, I will give him my daughter."

The friend went back to Uggasena's house and reported to the parents what the acrobat had said. The parents then went to Uggasena and communicated the information to their son.

Uggasena immediately said, "Of course I will travel around with them."

His parents were shocked and terribly upset that he wanted to leave them and give up the comfortable lifestyle they worked so hard to provide for him, to travel around with people of lower status. They begged him not to do so, but he paid no attention to anything they said. He left the house and went to join the acrobats.

He stayed with the acrobats and helped them with whatever was needed, so the father of the beautiful lady acrobat gave his daughter to Uggasena in marriage. They traveled around through villages, towns with large markets, and royal cities where kings lived, and gave performances everywhere. Uggasena and his wife soon had a baby.

When the wife played with their baby son and sang to him, she called him "son of a cart-driver" or "son of a fetcher of wood and bringer of water" or "son of a know-nothing." Uggasena indeed took care of everything relating to the acrobats' carts, such as driving the carts and bringing grass and water for the oxen that pulled the carts, and he carried boxes and set up and took down all the equipment needed by the acrobats for their performances. His wife was

referring to his duties when she sang these names to their son. Uggasena knew it, and felt insulted and hurt.

As she sang, he asked his wife, "Are you referring to me?"

She replied, "Yes, I refer to you."

He said, "In that case I will run away and leave you."

She responded coldly, "What difference does it make to me whether you go away or not?"

She continued singing the same songs, over and over. Apparently, she felt that she didn't need him because of her beauty and skill and the large amount of money she earned from her acrobatic performances, so she didn't care about him.

He thought, "Why is she so arrogant?" And then he considered, "It's because of her skill as an acrobat." So, he thought to himself, "Very well! I will learn to be an acrobat myself."

So, he went to his wife's father and after a while he learned all the acrobatic routines that his father-in-law knew. When they traveled to villages, market-towns and royal cities, Uggasena performed along with the other acrobats.

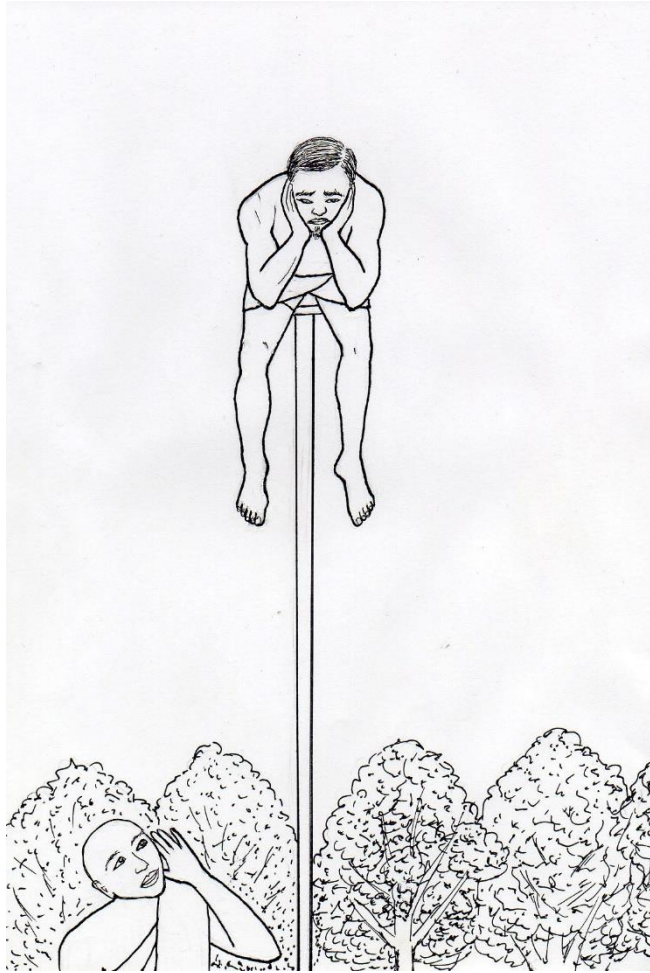
One day, they were on the way to perform in Rajagaha, Uggasena's home town. He told the town messengers to announce, "Seven days from today Uggasena the wealthy merchant's son will exhibit his skill to the residents of the city."

The residents of Rajagaha built platforms and stacked them one upon another within seven days. On the day of the performance, Uggasena climbed an extremely long pole and balanced himself on top of it.

Earlier that day, as the sun was beginning to rise, the Buddha looked at the world with his mind—his inner eye—and saw Uggasena. The Buddha considered, "What will become of him?" Immediately he became aware of what would happen that day. He saw that Uggasena, the wealthy merchant's son, will balance himself on the tip of a pole for the purpose of displaying his skill, and a huge crowd will be there to see his performance. And he, the Buddha, will speak a stanza of four lines of the Dharma. Hearing this stanza, 84,000 living beings will understand the Dharma and Uggasena himself will become an arahant. The Buddha knew that Uggasena was now ready to realize the Dharma.

So the Buddha, along with many of his monks, walked into the city of Rajagaha to receive their food for the day.

A moment before the Buddha entered the city, Uggasena motioned to the audience as a signal for applause. Balancing himself on the top of the pole, he turned somersaults in the air, and landed on his feet, again balancing himself on the top of the pole.



At that moment, the Buddha entered the city and made an intention that the crowd should look at him rather than at Uggasena. When Uggasena looked at the audience and saw that they all were not looking at him, he was overwhelmed with disappointment. He thought, "Here is a stunt which has taken me a year to perfect, but when the Buddha enters the city, the audience, instead of looking at me, looks at the Buddha. My performance has failed completely." He just sat on the pole, in deep despair, feeling completely worthless.

The Buddha, knowing the thought that was in Uggasena's mind, said to the Venerable Moggallana, "Go and inform the wealthy merchant's son that the Buddha wants him to show his skill."

Venerable Moggallana went and stood at the base of the pole, and said to Uggasena, "Please look, Uggasena, acrobat of mighty strength. Perform for the crowd; make the people smile."

When Uggasena heard the words of this great monk, he was delighted, thinking, "No doubt the Buddha wants to see my skill."

As he balanced himself on the top of the pole, he said, "Please look, Moggallana, mighty in wisdom and power. I perform for the crowd; I make the people smile."

Then he sprang into the air from the top of the pole, turned twice as many somersaults as he had done before, and landed on his feet, balancing himself again at the top of the pole.

The Buddha said, "Uggasena, a man that is wise should let go attachment to the things of the past, the present and the future; then he should win release from birth, decay, disease, and death." Then the Buddha said the following stanza:

Let go what is past,

Let go the future and the present;  
With a mind freed from all things of the world  
You will not again come to birth and decay.

This means to let go of, not be attached to, what was in the past, what is in the present, and what is in the future. When we release attachments—when we let go of what we are attached to—then we become enlightened and don't have to suffer in future lives.

At the end of this lesson, 84,000 living beings understood the Dharma. Uggasena, even as he stood on the top of the pole, became an arahant and attained higher powers.

He immediately came down from the pole, walked up to the Buddha, bowed to him, and respectfully requested the Buddha to permit him to become a monk.

The Buddha stretched out his right hand and said, "Come, monk!"

At that moment, the eight items required by a monk appeared—upper, lower and outer robes, a bowl, a razor, a needle for mending, a belt and a water filter. Suddenly, Uggasena looked like an old monk.

The monks, curious about his life as an acrobat, asked him, "Friend Uggasena, didn't you have any fear as you came down from that long pole?"

Uggasena replied, "Friends, I have no fear."

The monks went to the Buddha and said, "Lord, Uggasena says 'I have no fear'; he says that which is not true—he's telling a lie."

The Buddha replied, "Monks, those monks who, like my son Uggasena, have given up the attachments, have no fear or worry." Then he said the following verse:

"He who having cut all that binds him trembles not,  
Gone beyond ties, free from bonds—that one I call a brahmin."

The monks wondered how someone could be an arahant—so advanced in wisdom—when he had just become a monk after having traveled around as an acrobat so he could have a pretty acrobat for a wife. They began a discussion about it. One of them said,

"Friends, how did it happen that a monk, who had what was necessary to become an arahant as this monk had, traveled around with acrobats for the sake of an acrobat's daughter? And how did it happen that he had what was necessary to become an arahant?"

The Buddha came up to them and asked, "Monks, what is the subject you are discussing as you sit here all gathered together?"

When they told him, he said, “Monks, both of these things happened through one and the same circumstance.”

Then he told them the following story of the past:

A long time ago, a young couple loaded their cart with a lot of food to serve to workers who were building a golden shrine for the relics of the buddha of the past, named Buddha Kassapa. Along the way as they were traveling to give the food to the laborers, they saw a monk entering the city to receive food. The young woman looked at the monk and said to her husband,

“The noble monk is entering the city for food and there is so much food in our cart. Fetch his bowl and let’s give him food.”

The husband went to the monk and brought his bowl, and then they filled it with food and placed it in the hands of the monk. As they did so, they both made the wish, “Lord, may we be able to realize the Truth that you have seen.”

The monk was an arahant, so he could look into the future to see whether their wish would be fulfilled. He saw that it would be fulfilled, and he smiled. The couple didn’t know he was an arahant or why he was smiling, so they assumed he was just pretending to know something. The wife said to her husband, “The noble monk smiled; he must be some actor.”

The husband agreed, “He must be indeed, my dear wife.”

After the couple passed away, they were reborn as gods in a heaven-world, and later the wife was born as the acrobat’s daughter and the husband was born into the wealthy merchant’s family as Uggasena. Because in that former life he had agreed with his wife that the monk smiled because he was just acting, he had to travel around with actors—acrobats. But because he gave food to an arahant, that good deed became a cause for him to become an arahant.

Meanwhile, the acrobat’s daughter, her husband now having become a monk, wished to herself, “whatever future state my husband shall attain, that I will also attain.” This led to her becoming ordained as a nun into the Buddha’s Sangha, and later she became an arahant, too.

*Questions:*

1. What did Uggasena do when he arrived home, to show his parents how much he wanted to marry the acrobat? (he threw himself on his bed, refused to eat, and said he would die if he can’t have her)

2. How did Uggasena's parents feel when Uggasena agreed to travel with the acrobats to marry the acrobat's daughter? (they were shocked and terribly upset)
3. How did Uggasena feel when his wife sang songs to their baby, calling him a "son of a cart-driver" and "son of a know-nothing"? (insulted and hurt)
4. Who did the crowd look at when Uggasena somersaulted at the top of the pole and the Buddha entered the city? (the Buddha)
5. How did Uggasena feel when the crowd looked at the Buddha and ignored him? (overwhelmed with disappointment, in deep despair, completely worthless)
6. Where was Uggasena when the Buddha taught him to let go of attachments and then Uggasena became an arahant? (at the top of the pole)

*What the Buddha said:*

"Muñca pure muñca pacchato, majjhe muñca bhavassa pāragū, sabbattha vimutta mānaso, na puna jātijaraṃ upehisi."

"Let go the past, let go the future, let go the present. Having reached the end of existences, with a mind freed from all (conditioned things), you will not again undergo birth and decay."

Dhammapada 348

*Dharma discussion – Attachment and Impermanence:*

What does "attachment" mean? Our feeling toward whatever it is that we like or want to keep. It's our clinging to, our wanting to have, or our desire to keep, whatever it is that we like. We can be attached to certain friends, pets, toys, sports, videogames, favorite activities, favorite places, favorite foods, smartphones, social media, and many other things. What are you most attached to? We all have many, many things we are attached to. We're strongly attached to some things and not so strongly attached to other things. Sometimes we can be too attached to something.

Uggasena was too attached to the lady acrobat.

When we are too attached, what problems can arise?

As we see from Uggasena, we can become so focused on what we're attached to that we forget about important things such as our family and our responsibilities.

He was so obsessed with the lady acrobat, even without knowing anything about her, that he forgot about everything he had—his family, friends, community, lifestyle, education and wealth. Have you ever forgotten something important because of a favorite thing you're strongly

attached to? For example, have you ever forgotten to do something important because you were so attached to a game you were playing?

Uggasena was extremely attached to something else, once he learned to be an acrobat. Can you guess what it was? His acrobatic skill and the admiration from audiences. How do we know he was so strongly attached? Because when he didn't get the admiration—when he was ignored—he went into deep depression, despair, and felt worthless. So, another problem that can arise when we're too attached to something is that we get terribly upset if we can't have it or when we don't have it anymore. For example, if we aren't allowed to have it or if someone takes it away, we become depressed, disrespectful, aggressive, angry, or even violent, throwing things or hitting someone.

Even if we have what we are attached to, does it give us joy?  
It does for a while but doesn't give us fully satisfying, lasting happiness.  
Why is that? Because everything changes.

Things change: things become old, broken, damaged, lost or stolen; things come and go.  
People change: their interests change, or they disappoint us, move away, or find other friends.  
Circumstances change: sometimes we're successful and sometimes unsuccessful, sometimes we win and sometimes we lose, sometimes we're admired and sometimes we're criticized or ignored; something better becomes available; what is popular becomes unpopular.  
And we change: our interests change, our feelings change, and we often want something new.  
What gave us great joy later on can give us no joy at all, or even the deepest disappointment.

Everything changes and is impermanent; it doesn't last forever.  
When we know this, then we can avoid being like Uggasena, getting so attached to one friend or one thing that we neglect other people and other important things.  
And, if we remember that everything changes, we can begin to calm our feelings of anger or depression when we can't have what we want.  
Also, remember that we learn from our losses, failures, criticisms and disappointments; we learn how to do better next time, and we learn how to learn how to cope with changes.

That is how we can begin to let go of extreme attachment.  
The Buddha taught about letting go of attachment to things of the past, present and future.  
What things of the past, present and future are we attached to?  
The past is our memories. When we're too attached to things of the past—our memories, thinking about what has already happened—then we might feel sad, upset or distracted from what is going on now, and then we miss opportunities that we have right now.  
The present is right now. If we're too attached to things in the present, then we want to keep on enjoying what we are enjoying right now. And we get upset or angry when it changes.  
Attachment to the future means our hopes and expectations. If we are too attached to our hopes and expectations, then we get very disappointed or angry when things don't go our way.

When we remember not to be too attached, that everything changes and is impermanent, then we can reduce all those unpleasant feelings.



In the story, the Buddha also taught the monks that people who have let go of their attachments have no fear or worry.

Let's see how this can apply to us.

If you are trying to win a competition, how would you feel when others start winning?

You might worry or fear that you are going to lose.

That can be a good way to motivate yourself to perform better, to try harder to win.

But if we are too attached to our hope or expectation of winning, then we might have so much worry or fear that we lose concentration and perform worse, or we might get terribly upset and become a "poor sport" if we don't win.

If you are trying to make a new friend, how would you feel if that person ignores you?

You might worry or fear that they don't like you.

If you are too attached to having that person as your friend, you might start acting bossy, overly controlling, depressed or jealous, which could make the person less likely to be your friend.

It's more important for our well-being and overall happiness to learn not to be too attached than to always get what we want.

We can love other beings, we can enjoy things, competitions and other activities, we can experience and have fun, and plan and hope for the future.

But we remember that everything changes, nothing lasts forever, so we enjoy it while it lasts, and we don't expect it to be permanent and give us constant, unending joy.

And we aren't so upset and hurt when they do change.