

## **Coppertooth the Executioner**

There was once a group of 499 thieves who made a living by plundering villages and other acts of violence. One day, a man called Coppertooth, who had copper-colored teeth, yellowish skin and a body covered with scars, came to them and said,

“Let me also live with you.”

They took him to the ringleader of the thieves, saying, “This man also wishes to live with us.”

The ringleader of the thieves looked at the man and thought to himself, “This man’s nature is inordinately cruel. He is capable of cutting off the breast of his mother and eating it, or of drawing the blood from the throat of his father and drinking it.” Therefore, he refused the request, saying,

“It will not do for this man to live with us.”

Although Coppertooth had been refused admission to the band of thieves, he made friends with a man who served the ringleader. After some time, the man approached the ringleader and said,

“Master, this man is a dutiful servant of ours; bestow your favor on him.”

Having made this request, he turned Coppertooth over to the ringleader to let him join the group.

One day, the citizens joined forces with the king’s men, captured the whole group of thieves and took them to court for arraignment. The judges ordered their heads to be chopped off with an axe for their crimes.

The citizens asked, “Who will put these men to death?”

After a thorough search, they were unable to find a single man who was willing to put them to death. Finally, they said to the ringleader of the thieves,

“You put these men to death, and we will spare your life and give you a rich reward also. You kill them.”

But because they had lived with him, the ringleader was unwilling to put them to death. The citizens then offered the same deal to the other thieves, but all of them refused when asked. Last of all, they asked Coppertooth.

“Yes, indeed,” he said, consenting to the deal.

So, he put to death all the thieves, and in return his life was spared and he received rich gifts. Some time later, the citizens together with the king's men brought another large group of thieves from the country to the south of the city, and arraigned them before the judges. When the judges ordered their heads to be chopped off, the citizens asked each thief, beginning with the ringleader, to put his companions to death, but found not a single one willing to act as executioner. Then one of the citizens said,

"The other day a certain man put five hundred thieves to death. Where is he?"

Another citizen answered that they saw him at a certain place, so they summoned Coppertoath and said to him, "Put these men to death, and you will receive a rich reward."

"Yes, indeed," replied Coppertoath, agreeing to the job.

He put all the thieves to death and received his reward.

The citizens consulted together and said, "This is a most excellent man. We will make him the permanent executioner of thieves."

So, they gave him the job. Later on, they brought other groups of thieves, and Coppertoath put all of them to death. As time went on, one or two men were brought in each day for execution, and he put them all to death. For a period of fifty-five years, he acted as the public executioner.

In his old age, he could no longer cut off a man's head with a single cut, but had to do it in two or three cuts, causing much unnecessary suffering for the victims. The citizens thought to themselves, "We can get another executioner of thieves. This man subjects his victims to much unnecessary torture. Of what use is he any longer?" Accordingly, they dismissed him from his job.

During his employment as executioner, he had been accustomed to receiving old clothes to wear, milk-porridge made with fresh ghee to drink, sweet smelling jasmine flowers to make into flower garlands to adorn himself, and perfumes to anoint himself. But he wouldn't be receiving these any longer, now that he was no longer employed. On the day he was told to leave his job, he gave orders that milk-porridge should be cooked for him. And, taking with him old clothes, jasmine flowers and perfumes, he went to the river and bathed. Then he put on the old clothes, decked himself with garlands, anointed his limbs with perfume, went home and sat down. Milk-porridge was set before him.

At that moment, Venerable Sariputta emerged from his meditation and said to himself, "Where should I go today?" With his mind's eye and supernormal vision, he looked at where he would be going that morning to seek food donations, and saw milk-porridge in the house of the executioner. Venerable Sariputta asked himself, "Will this man receive me kindly?" He became aware of the following: "This excellent man will receive me kindly and will thereby gain a rich reward." So Sariputta took his bowl and went to the door of the executioner's house.

When Coppertooth saw the monk, his heart was filled with joy as he thought to himself, "For a long time I have acted as executioner of thieves, and I have put many men to death. Now, milk-porridge has been prepared in my house, and the monk has come and stands at my threshold. Now I ought to present offerings to his reverence." So, he removed the porridge that had been set before him, approached the monk, bowed, guided him into the house, and provided a seat. Coppertooth poured the milk-porridge into Sariputta's bowl, spread fresh ghee on it, stood beside him and began to fan him.

It had been a long time since the executioner had last eaten, and therefore he greatly desired to drink the milk-porridge.

Sariputta, knowing his desire, said, "Lay disciple, drink your own porridge," and poured some of the porridge back into Coppertooth's bowl.

Coppertooth placed the fan into another man's hand and drank the porridge. Sariputta said to the man who was now fanning him,

"Go fan the lay disciple instead."

While the man fanned him, Coppertooth finished his porridge and then resumed fanning Venerable Sariputta who was finishing his meal.

When Sariputta began the words of thanksgiving to his host, Coppertooth was not able to concentrate on Sariputta's teaching.

Observing this, Sariputta said to him, "Lay disciple, why is it that you are not able to fix your mind on my discourse?"

Coppertooth replied, "Reverend sir, for a long time I have done deeds of cruelty; I have put many men to death. It is because I keep recalling my own past deeds that I am unable to fix my mind on your reverence's discourse."

Sariputta thought to himself, "I will play a trick on him," and said to Coppertooth, "But did you do this of your own free will, or were you made to do it by others?"

Coppertooth answered, "The king made me do it, reverend sir."

Sariputta asked, "If that is the case, lay disciple, what wrong did you do?"

The bewildered Coppertooth thought, "According to what the monk says, I have done no wrong," and then he said, "Very well, reverend sir, continue your discourse."

As Sariputta continued the Dharma teaching, Coppertooth's mind became tranquil, and as he listened to the Dharma, he developed the quality of patience, and progressed in the direction of

the path of stream-entry, the first level of enlightenment. When Sariputta completed the discourse, he left the house, with Coppertoath accompanying him for a little while. When Coppertoath turned back toward his house, an ogress came along in the form of a cow, stuck him with her shoulder, and killed him. Upon his death, he was reborn in the Tusita heaven.

In the monks' assembly hall, called the Hall of Truth, the monks began a discussion. One asked, "He who was an executioner of thieves, he who for fifty-five years committed acts of cruelty, today was dismissed from his job, today gave offerings to a monk, today met death. Where was he reborn?"

The Buddha walked in and asked what they were discussing. When they told him, he said, "Monks, that man has been reborn into the world of the Tusita gods."

The monks were shocked and said, "What did you say, reverend sir? He who killed men for so long a time has been reborn in the world of the Tusita gods?"

The Buddha replied, "Yes, monks. A great and good spiritual counsellor did he receive. He heard Sariputta teach the Dharma, and profiting thereby, acquired knowledge. When he departed from this existence, he was reborn in the world of the Tusita gods." Then he said,

"He who was executioner of thieves in the city  
Listened to words well spoken,  
Having gained patience accordingly,  
He went to heaven, and is in joy."

A monk said, "Reverend sir, there is no great power in words of thanksgiving, and this man had done much wrong. How could he gain something special with so little?"

The Buddha replied, "Monks, do not measure the Dharma I have taught as being little or much. One saying possessed of meaning is of surpassing merit."

So saying, he instructed them in the Dharma by pronouncing the following stanzas:

"Though a thousand speeches  
Are made of meaningless lines,  
Better the single meaningful line  
By hearing which one is at peace."

- Dhammapada 100.

### ***Dharma Discussion – Guilt and Regret:***

This story has some surprises. It's surprising that one of the most advanced of the Buddha's monks, Venerable Sariputta, would go to Coppertoath's home. Sariputta, like the Buddha, went to visit people whom he knew would most benefit from hearing the Dharma—those whose minds were open to hearing it, and who had enough merit to appreciate and understand the Dharma, so they would progress toward enlightenment.

How could Coppertoath be such a person?

And why would Sariputta think of him as “this excellent man?”

We would assume that someone who callously kills people for a living, who apparently has no compassion, would not have developed much merit.

But maybe we can glean something about his character from the description of his appearance. His scars suggest he had many injuries from experiencing violence, and his copper-colored teeth suggest he had suffered neglect, poverty or unhealthy conditions.

Perhaps these experiences resulted in callousness, desperation and willingness to take whatever job was available.

Nevertheless, Coppertoath felt joy when he saw the monk at his door, and immediately offered his own food although it was the last meal he would get for his work and he hadn't eaten in a while.

So, he valued making merit, was generous, and appreciated spiritual opportunities.

And he did gain a rich reward, as Sariputta predicted, by progressing spiritually upon hearing the Dharma. So, he indeed did have significant merit and good qualities, presumably developed in past lives, despite the violent actions he did as an executioner.

One lesson from this story is that we can't judge someone simply by observing their current behavior and appearance. We might recall the story of Angulimala, the serial murderer who was transformed and became a monk after he met the Buddha, who displayed his supernormal powers to break through Angulimala's thick mental obscurations and reveal his good qualities.

Another surprise in this story is that Venerable Sariputta used a bit of trickery, with a wise choice of words, to break through and release Coppertoath's feeling of guilt.

With his deep wisdom, Sariputta knew what he had to do to help Coppertoath.

When Coppertoath listened to a discourse on noble qualities knowing that he had committed deathly violence against so many people, cognitive dissonance arose.

That heavy burden of guilt conflicted with the talk about purity, so he couldn't focus.

So, Sariputta relaxed and opened Coppertoath's mind by relieving him of guilt, suggesting that killing because one was made to do it by others is not so wrong or blameworthy as killing from one's own free will, for example due to hate or cruelty.

Yet another surprise is that only from hearing a few words of the Dharma, Coppertoath's thoughts were so pure that he went to Tusita heaven when he died.

The Buddha taught that the world one is next born into is influenced not only the good and bad karma one has, but also the thoughts one has at the moment of death.

Therefore, it's very important not to carry a burden of guilt.

But if we have no guilt, shame, regret or remorse for our wrong actions, is that healthy? Certainly a psychopath or sociopath, defined in part as one who has no remorse, is not healthy!

First, let's distinguish shame, guilt, regret and remorse:

Guilt is the feeling of having done something bad, or of failing to do what was expected.

Shame is the feeling of being a bad person or unworthy for having done wrong or failing what was expected.

Regret is the acknowledgment of wrongdoing, making a mistake or failure to do what was expected and wishing we hadn't done so.

Remorse is the feeling of having wronged or harmed someone and wishing to make amends.

Regret and remorse mean "owning" our mistake, learning from it and intending to do better from now on.

They can be constructive feelings, confessions to ourselves that we did something wrong, along with determination not to do it again.

On the other hand, guilt and shame are destructive feelings of having failed, and they may generate feelings of low self-esteem or unworthiness.

Any of these feelings can arise after we say or do something during moments of anger, revenge, hate, recklessness, impulsivity, or selfishness.

But regret can arise in countless additional contexts. For example, we regret failing to act when we were distracted. We regret wasting time, or missing an opportunity. We regret making a bad decision. We regret being ignorant or tolerant of someone abusing or manipulating us. Or we regret that we didn't help or save a person or animal, or that we didn't prevent a disaster when we could have done so.

Sometimes the impact of our mistake or failure is immense, not only on ourselves but also on others.

For example, Venerable Ananda, the Buddha's attendant, deeply regretted being distracted and failing to respond appropriately when the Buddha suggested Ananda could ask him to live longer. As a result, the Buddha didn't extend his lifespan. Later, Ananda was reprimanded for such failure by Venerable Kassapa, one of the most senior members of the Sangha.

The psychological impact can be overwhelming, especially when we are not as spiritually advanced as Venerable Ananda.

Sometimes people try to avoid the painful feelings of guilt or shame by denying or diminishing what happened, by blaming others, or by making excuses.

Feelings of guilt, shame, regret or remorse might preoccupy and agitate our mind so much that we "beat ourselves up" or engage in self-condemnation. Some people harbor unresolved guilt or self-blame throughout their entire lives.

We might try to constantly distract ourselves from those feelings with entertainment and other dopamine-inducing activities—social media, gaming, videos, partying, shopping and so forth.

Whether we engage in self-reproach or in constant distraction, they interfere with our ability to engage in healthier and more constructive activities.

Even if we we're not having such intense thoughts and feelings, we might find it difficult to listen to someone teach about such lofty topics as lovingkindness, compassion and patience. It seems too saccharine sweet when in the back of our mind are dark thoughts—we hope that a competitor loses, we wish a certain horrible person would suffer, or we're plotting revenge against someone who hurt us. We might avoid listening to the Dharma because, like Coppertooth, we experience cognitive dissonance when we hear it.

However, instead of turning away from the Dharma, or feeling bad about ourselves, or beating ourselves up, we can use regret or remorse to further ourselves along the path of the Dharma. We use our failures, regret and remorse to motivate us like a springboard—the painful feelings propel us to seek relief in a constructive way.

Whenever we make a mistake that triggers feelings of regret or remorse, we can do the following practice, the Four Powers of Purification, that gives us relief and leads us forward on the path to peace, happiness and enlightenment. Although it is taught in the Vajrayana Buddhist tradition, it can be practiced by anyone. It can be practiced at the end of each day to purify all the mistakes we have made that day.

#### *The Four Powers of Purification (The 4 Rs):*

##### 1. Remorse/Regret

First, we recognize—confess to ourselves—that we made a mistake; we did something we wish we hadn't done, or we didn't do something we wish we had done.

Then, we are mindful of our thoughts. We notice whether we are identifying ourselves with our actions, caught in a habit of guilty or shameful thoughts such as "I'm a failure," "how could I be so stupid," "no wonder people don't like me," "I guess no one wants to trust me anymore," "I always mess things up."

Let go of those thoughts by allowing the mistake to feel like something external; it feels like dirt on our body or poison that we have ingested, and we want to get rid of it.

Consider that the mistake is a negative karma, an imprint in our mind, and guilt about it can hinder spiritual development, so now we are reducing the negative karma and increasing our merit (positive karma) by this confession and spiritual practice.

Remember that our mistakes are useful. Dealing with our mistakes gives us knowledge not only to avoid repeating similar errors, but also to advise others who make similar mistakes or are in similar situations. Also, it gives us more understanding, tolerance and compassion toward others when they make similar mistakes.

##### 2. Remedy/Antidote

The next power is to find a remedy for our mistake; get rid of the poison, wash the dirt away. We do something positive to counteract the negative act, for example:

- apologize and make amends to the person we harmed, and wish them peace and happiness
- generate lovingkindness and compassion for all beings through prayer, meditation
- practice any form of meditation
- chant prayers, Buddhist stanzas, or a mantra
- volunteer to help someone, do volunteer work or service for someone in need, or do random acts of kindness.

### 3. Resolution/Restraint

The third power is to resolve not to repeat our behavior, not to do the negative act again.

We exercise caution so we don't fall into the same actions.

Recognizing that we acted without awareness, we are determined to be more aware so we don't make the same mistake.

We analyze what factors led to our mistake, but only to the extent that it's constructive in helping us avoid repeating it; we shouldn't ruminate over it.

For acts that are habits or that are difficult to stop completely, such as losing our temper, we can just resolve not to do them for a specific period of time, such as one day. Then, over time, we try to increase the period of time. We develop confidence one step at a time in our ability to change for the better, and don't get upset with relapses; we just keep our determination and start again. Like we learn to do many things in life, we try and try again, and fail and fail again—but we keep up our determination.

### 4. Reliance/Refuge

We need help to be firm in our determination, to carry through our resolution.

We have to rely on a dependable, trusted guide to show us the path. So, we take refuge in the Buddha who is like a doctor whose medicine, the Dharma, purifies our actions. And we take refuge in the Sangha, the community of noble monks and Dharma practitioners who can offer us support. The Buddha, Dharma and Sangha give us confidence that others are also working to overcome their weaknesses and persevering on the path to true peace and happiness.

We can bring to mind a form of the Buddha that is most familiar to us (or a sphere of light representing enlightenment), and request the Buddha's help and guidance in overcoming our mistakes, and strength to carry through our resolutions.

We can meditate, visualizing that we are laying in a cool, cascading mountain stream, and the water flows gently over our body, refreshing and purifying it. Then it flows inside our body from our head to our toes, washing away all our busy thoughts and emotions.

Next, the water becomes a warm waterfall of light that falls gently on the top of our head and cascades down over our body, and then flows inside our body, washing away all remaining negative feelings—all stress, worry, guilt, shame, and any subtle negative emotions are washed away by the waterfall of light, like a shower washes away dirt from our body.

Next, imagine that the Buddha is smiling at you, and says that all is forgiven, all is purified.

Finally, we share the merit of our practice with all sentient beings, and especially all those whom we have hurt, wishing that they be happy, peaceful and free from suffering.