

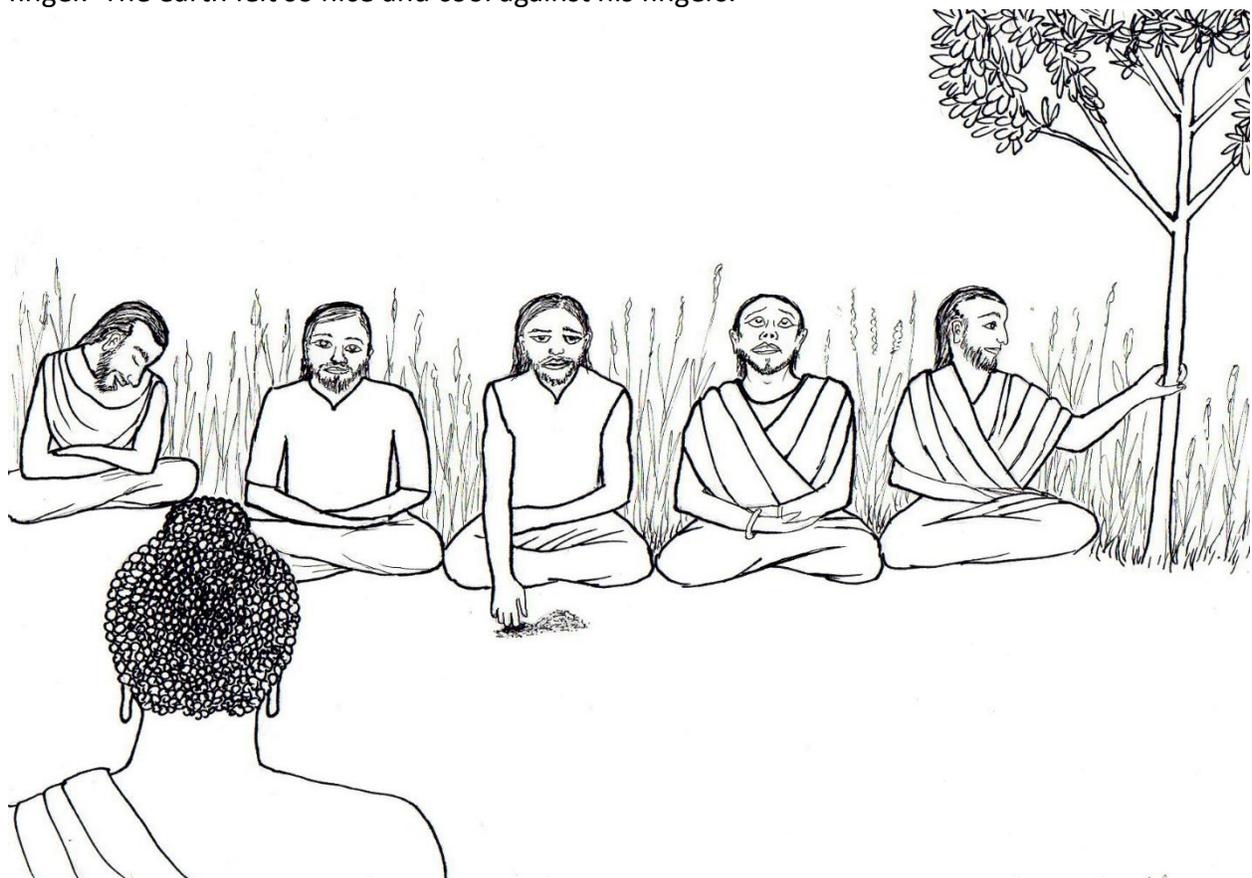
## CHAPTER 5 – BORED WITH THE DHARMA

There were five men who went to the monastery wanting to hear the Dharma. They heard that the Buddha was a great teacher of the Dharma, and they knew that hearing the Dharma was a good karma that would help give them a good future. They bowed respectfully to the Buddha and sat down.

The Buddha began to teach the Dharma. Buddhas don't teach to entertain, nor do they teach in order to make anyone feel special or exceptional regarding their wealth or social status, because it might increase their attachments to things in the world or increase their ego or self-centeredness. Buddhas teach so people will have great respect for the Dharma, so that they learn ways to reduce their attachments, calm and purify their minds, and reach enlightenment.

The Buddha's teaching didn't make the men laugh or feel proud of themselves, and didn't tell thrilling stories. So, it wasn't interesting enough to keep one of the men awake, and he gradually became very sleepy. As he sat there, his eyes closed and his head began to nod. Soon, his chin was resting on his chest and he fell asleep.

The second one of the five began to stroke the earth with his finger, making designs on the soil. Then he made deeper lines in the soil. And finally, he began to dig deeper in the soil with his finger. The earth felt so nice and cool against his fingers.



The third of the five men was sitting near a small tree. He pushed gently against the tree to see if it would bend. Then he pushed harder, and felt it bend a little. Then he grasped the tree trunk in his hands and pushed it back and forth to make the leaves rustle slightly. He liked the sound of the rustling leaves, and shook the tree more to make the leaves rustle.

The fourth of the five men noticed an interesting cloud in the sky. Then he saw the moon. The sun was starting to go down, so he gazed all around the sky to see if he could find any stars shining. He loved to look at the sky.

The fifth man was different. He wasn't distracted like the others, but was very alert. He listened with full attention to the Dharma teaching.

Venerable Ananda was observing the five men. He stood next to the Buddha, fanning him to keep him cool and keep insects away. He said quietly to the Buddha,

“Lord, you are teaching the Dharma so clearly and powerfully, like the thunder during a heavy rain. But even as you are teaching, only one of these men was listening attentively. The others were sitting there sleeping, playing with the soil, fidgeting with a tree, or looking up at the sky. Why are they behaving this way?”

The Buddha asked, “Ananda, do you know these men?”

Venerable Ananda replied, “No, Lord, I don't.”

The Buddha said, “Of these five men, he that sits there sound asleep had five hundred past lives as a snake, and in each of those lives he coiled his body, laid his head on his coils and fell asleep. Therefore, now he is sound asleep. Not a sound I make enters his ear.”

Venerable Ananda was curious, and asked, “But, Lord, tell me, were these five hundred lives one right after the other, or was he a snake in some lifetimes and then reborn as another type of being in between the lifetimes as a snake?”

The Buddha replied, “Ananda, at one time this man was reborn as a human being, and another time as a god in a heaven-world, and at another time as a snake. Indeed, it would be impossible to determine exactly the number of times he has been reborn in each of these forms. But in five hundred lives one right after the other, he was born as a snake and fell asleep. Not even yet does he feel satisfied with enough sleep.”

The Buddha continued, “The man who sits there scratching the earth with his finger had five hundred past lives, one after another, as an earthworm and burrowed into the earth. So, he digs the earth now also, and doesn't hear my voice.”

“The man who sits there shaking a tree had five hundred past lives, one after another, as a monkey, and from the habit of monkeys that he had in those past lives, he still continues to shake a tree, and the sound of my voice does not enter his ears.”

“The brahmin who sits there gazing at the sky had five hundred past lives, one after the other, as an astrologer, and therefore today he gazes at the sky just the same, and the sound of my voice does not enter his ears.”

A brahmin is a man of the upper class, the highest level in society. An astrologer is a person who tells people about their future based on information about the planets, sun and moon.

The Buddha said, “The man who sits there listening attentively to the Dharma had five hundred lives, one after another, as a brahmin who had knowledge of the Three Vedas, and was devoted to studying and reciting those ancient holy teachings of India. Therefore, he listens attentively today also, as though he were putting together a holy scripture.”

Venerable Ananda still couldn’t understand why the four men wouldn’t be fascinated with the Dharma teaching that he could so clearly understand and enjoy. He said,

“But Lord, your teaching of the Dharma absorbs into the skin and even inside the bones. Why is it that while you are teaching the Dharma, they don’t listen attentively?”

The Buddha replied, “Ananda, you evidently imagine that my Dharma is easy to listen to.”

Venerable Ananda said, “Lord, do you mean that it is difficult to listen to?”

“Exactly so, Ananda.”

“Why is that, Lord?”

“Ananda, these living beings, during countless thousands of cycles of time, never heard of the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha and therefore are unable now to listen to this Dharma I teach. In all the countless lifetimes—we cannot imagine how long ago they began—these living beings were used to listening to the speech of animals of all kinds. Therefore, they spend their time in places where men drink and amuse themselves, and sing and dance. It is impossible for them to listen to the Dharma.”

Venerable Ananda still didn’t understand, asking, “But Lord, for what reason is it that they are unable to listen to the Dharma?”

The Buddha answered, “Ananda, they are unable to do so by reason of desire and craving, hatred and delusion. There is no fire like the fire of desire, which burns up living beings without even leaving any ashes. The world-fire which finishes off an eon of time burns up the world without leaving anything behind, but it is a fire which breaks out only on the appearance of the

seven suns, and this fire burns only at certain times. But as for the fire of desire, there is no time when the fire of desire doesn't burn. Therefore I say that there is no fire like the fire of desire, no grip like hatred, no trap like delusion, and no river like craving."

*Questions:*

1. Why did the five men go to the monastery? (they wanted to hear the Dharma, they knew hearing the Dharma was good karma and would help give them a good future, and heard that the Buddha was a great teacher)
2. Why, according to the Buddha, did the first man fall asleep? (he had five hundred past lives as a snake, and would coil his body and fall asleep)
3. Why, according to the Buddha, did the second man dig in the soil? (he had five hundred past lives as an earthworm)
4. Why, according to the Buddha, did the third man shake the tree? (he had five hundred past lives as a monkey)
5. Why, according to the Buddha, did the fourth man gaze at the sky? (he had five hundred past lives as an astrologer)
6. What was the fifth man interested in during five hundred past lives? (studying and reciting the ancient holy teachings of India)

*What the Buddha said:*

"Natthi rāga samo aggi, natthi dosa samo gaho,  
natthi moha samaṃ jālam, natthi taṇhāsamā nadi."  
"There is no fire like desire, no grip like hate, no net like delusion, no river like craving."

Dhammapada 251 (18:9)

*Dharma discussion – Habits and the Three Poisons:*

This story tells us a lot about past lives. What did you learn from the story about past lives? We have had so many past lives that we cannot count them. We likely have had many, many past lives as animals and as humans. We might have habits now that come from our past lives as animals or our past human lives. If we are able to listen to the Dharma now, we had past lives learning spiritual teachings. And those who in past lives didn't learn much spiritual teaching, or about the Buddha or Dharma, are not interested in the Dharma now.

But does that mean they are bad or unimportant? No! We too were like that in past lives! Everyone goes through lifetimes like that.

We can have compassion for people who aren't interested in the Dharma, because they haven't yet found the path to end all suffering, and we were once like that in the past.

What if we see people falling asleep or fidgeting during a Dharma talk—can we assume they're not listening to the Dharma, or not interested in it? No.

We can't judge people based only on what we see. People may be listening very carefully to the Dharma even if their eyes are closed or they are fidgeting or appear distracted.

Or, a person might just be very tired or unable to concentrate for some reason during a particular Dharma talk.

Those of us who pay attention to stories of the Buddha and Dharma discussions most likely enjoyed them in past lives too. And this is extremely special and fortunate!

This is because most people, like those in the story, are not interested in the Dharma.

It's only because we have a lot of good karma—we made a lot of merit—plus we had an interest in spiritual teachings in past lives that we are interested in the Buddha now.

Why do people not listen to the Dharma when they had no past lives, or only a few, learning spiritual teachings?

They have so much delusion and desire, craving and hatred in their minds that they think that just fulfilling their desires will make them happy.

Desire, hatred and delusion are called the Three Poisons in Buddhism.

Desire also includes greed, craving, and attachment to things that don't lead to wisdom.

Hatred also includes disgust, anger and aversion, which means dislike.

Delusion includes ignorance, confusion, not having wisdom, not knowing.

Why are they called the Three Poisons?

Because they cause suffering and death, like poison causes suffering and death.

The Three Poisons cause all types of suffering, so they are also called the roots of suffering.

What do we mean by "suffering" in Buddhism?

It's not only the extremely painful feeling or terrible grief that we usually think of as suffering, but also any unpleasantness—any kind of dissatisfaction, distress, worry, fear, disappointment, frustration, anxiety, unhappiness or discomfort.

How can desire, hatred and delusion cause all suffering?

When we desire something, then sometimes we don't get it, can't have it, it breaks, or we lose it or get bored with it, so we feel dissatisfied, disappointed, unhappy, or upset—we suffer.

When we hate or dislike something, it may be hard to avoid it or get away from it, which makes us feel uncomfortable, anxious, distressed, angry, worried, or afraid.

With ignorance—when we don't have wisdom—then we have so many desires for things in the world that we think will make us happy, and there are so many things we don't like and try to avoid, so then we have all kinds of negative emotions such as frustration or anger when things don't go our way.

Doesn't everyone have some desire, hatred and delusion? Yes, until we become enlightened. And some desires and aversions are necessary—we desire food, clothes, friends and a home, and we hate feeling sick, hungry, too cold or too hot, so that we keep ourselves healthy. But when we have too many unnecessary things that we desire and hate, then we suffer more. Of course, we can't easily get rid of our desires like throwing them in the trash. But we try to be aware of them, and notice when they bother us, for example, when we get upset or angry about not getting what we want or when we lose what we are attached to, and when we feel irritable or angry thinking about something or someone we hate. And we try to remember that the less desires, hatred and delusion we have, the less we suffer, and the more peaceful and happy we become. And we try to reduce them. How do we do that? By learning and practicing the Dharma. We practice the Dharma by developing good habits and reducing our bad habits.

In Buddhism, what do we mean by “bad habits”?

Habits that cause harm to ourselves or others, that cause more negative emotions—such as more anger, hatred, jealousy, greed, arrogance, or selfishness.

It doesn't mean harmless habits, like those in the story—digging in the dirt, shaking trees, gazing at the sky, or sleeping. Those were only indications that the men weren't listening.

Can you think of some examples of bad habits?

Fighting, quarreling, bullying, insulting others, being too critical of others, lying, being dishonest, following others' misbehavior, showing off, buying things you don't need, insisting on having what others have, taking things that weren't given to you, playing too much videogames, and watching violent videos, or too much TV, social media, or unwholesome things on internet.

What are “good habits,” according to Buddhism?

Habits that develop our good qualities, such as lovingkindness, compassion, generosity, patience, tolerance, awareness and wisdom.

Can you think of some examples of good habits?

Helping others, being considerate and aware of what others might need, letting others go first, being honest, thanking others, complimenting others, appreciating others' success and good qualities, meditation, prayers before bed, practicing mindfulness, and having self-discipline with videogames, TV, videos, and using internet.

As we learned in the story, we tend to keep our strong habits even in our future lives.

So, what should we do about our good and bad habits, to have a good future?

We start good habits, make our good habits stronger, avoid starting bad habits, be aware of our bad habits, and try to reduce and control them.