

Lesson 8 – BELIEF - Sujatha’s Offering and Mara’s Challenge

After Siddhartha decided to keep his body healthy by eating normal food every day, he went to the nearby village of Senani so the villagers could offer him food. He was now 35 years old. Because he was eating normally again, he became strong and healthy, the golden color returned to his skin, and the brightness returned to his eyes.

The chief of the village had a daughter named Sujatha, who wished to get married and have a son. In those days in India, people would make wishes to a tree spirit, or deity of the tree, who they believed might grant their wish. Along with their wish, they would also make a promise to give something to the tree spirit if he grants the wish. Following that custom, Sujatha went to a big beautiful banyan tree, and said to the tree spirit:

“If I marry a good husband and have a son, then every year I will make you offerings worth 100,000 gold coins.”

Soon thereafter, she got married and had a son. So she knew she must fulfill her promise. She made very special efforts to make sure her cows would produce the best sweet, rich milk.

When the moon was full in the month called Visakha in the springtime, Sujatha directed the cowherds to milk the cows. As soon as the new cans were placed under their udders, the milk flowed from them immediately! That was impossible! How could that happen? Sujatha stared in wonder.

Then she boiled the milk together with rice. She watched as huge bubbles rose up and strangely, all the bubbles turned to the right, swirling around. When bubbles rise up in such a full pot, some milk would always flow over the edge of the pot. But even though so many huge bubbles arose, none of the milk spilled. Sujatha was amazed, and thought these must be miracles made by the tree spirit to show her that he was pleased. She turned to her servant, Punna, and exclaimed,

“Our deity is pleased! I have never seen miracles happen like this. Run to the banyan tree and prepare the place for the offering.”

Meanwhile, the night before, Siddhartha had five dreams which indicated to him that he would be enlightened that day.

Early in the morning, he found that same big beautiful banyan tree where Sujatha made the promise. He thought it was a good place to meditate, and he sat under it, with his face radiant, golden and serene, deep in meditation.

When Punna arrived at the banyan tree, she saw Siddhartha sitting there and she thought that was the deity of the tree appearing in person waiting to receive the

offerings. With great excitement, she ran back to Sujatha and told her what she saw.

Sujatha was thrilled, so she gave Punna gifts of beautiful clothes and jewelry. Sujatha took a golden tray worth 100,000 gold coins and poured the milk-rice on it, filling it, and then covered it. She put on a fresh dress and her best jewelry, and carried the tray on her head to the banyan tree.

She was overjoyed when she saw the radiant Siddhartha sitting under the tree. She bowed to him many times, thinking he was the tree deity to whom she had made her promise and who had granted her wishes. She uncovered the tray and placed it in Siddhartha's hands. She said,

“Lord, please accept my offering. May your wishes be fulfilled as mine have been.”

Siddhartha said to her, “Sister, what is to be done with this tray?”

Sujatha replied, “It is for you.”

Siddhartha said, “It is of no use for me.”

Sujatha said, “You may do with it whatever you wish.”

Siddhartha got up and went to the river to bathe, and then put his robes back on and sat on the shore of the river. He made all the milk-rice into 49 lumps, and ate all of it. He threw the tray into the river, thinking, “It will go upstream against the current if I will be successful in becoming enlightened.” The tray flew from his hand to the middle of the river, and then traveled far upstream, to where a Black Naga, a snake deity—a powerful snake spirit—received it.

Siddhartha walked along a road, and a man with freshly cut long grass approached him. Seeing that Siddhartha was a holy man, he offered him a big armload of grass. Siddhartha accepted it and went to a bodhi tree, the same kind of tree under which all buddhas sat while attaining enlightenment. He placed the pile of grass beneath the tree and sat on it, cross-legged, facing the east. He made a firm determination:

“Even if my skin, flesh and blood become dry, I will not leave this seat until I attain enlightenment, the highest wisdom, nirvana, the end of suffering.”

Mara was watching, and he wanted to prevent Siddhartha from becoming enlightened. Seeing Mara coming in the distance, Siddhartha kept his mind strong and focused on his own good qualities—his generosity, truthfulness, patience, perseverance, lovingkindness, wisdom, non-attachment, and so on.

Mara approached Siddhartha and caused a great wind to blow to scare him, and then a terrible rainstorm. These didn't make Siddhartha move or flinch in the slightest. Mara caused a shower of rocks and then weapons to appear falling from the sky. Siddhartha was not at all affected by these illusions. Mara caused red hot coals, then hot ashes, then sand, and then mud to appear to fall from the sky. Siddhartha, sitting perfectly still, didn't seem affected by any of these.

Then Mara thought that a great darkness would scare him, so Mara made everything appear to be covered in a deep darkness. Still there was no reaction from Siddhartha.



Mara told Siddhartha that his home town Kapilavasthu had been conquered and that his clan, the Sakyans, had been chased away. He threw a fire-shower at Siddhartha with black smoke and terribly loud thunder, and created ghostlike appearances of Yashodhara, his parents and his family and friends running away in fear.

Siddhartha didn't worry. He was totally unmoved.

Mara was extremely frustrated and angry. He shouted to his followers, "Seize, kill, and drive away this prince!"

Siddhartha remained perfectly still and calm.

Mara went closer to Siddhartha, shouting, "Siddhartha, arise from this seat! It doesn't belong to you, it belongs to me!"

Siddhartha replied calmly, "You have not attained the perfections of generosity, moral conduct, renunciation, wisdom, energy, patience, lovingkindness, truthfulness, determination, and equanimity. You have not made great donations. You have not made efforts for knowledge, for the welfare of the world, or for enlightenment. The seat doesn't belong to you but to me."

Mara was enraged. He shouted, "Who has witnessed you giving donations?"

Siddhartha calmly looked into the terrible face of Mara, and with great love and compassion looked at Mara as a father looks at his son playing at his feet.

Siddhartha stretched his hand down and touched the earth, replying, “The earth is my witness.”

As Siddhartha put his hand to the ground, it shook and a great thundering noise like loud roaring came from the earth. The followers of Mara fled and Mara himself disappeared.

Questions:

1. What did Sujatha believe the tree deity could do for her? (grant her wish to find a good husband and have a son)
2. Why did Sujatha offer Siddhartha milk-rice? (she believed he was the tree deity who had granted her wish)
3. What did Siddhartha do with the milk-rice? (he made it into 49 lumps and ate it)
4. What made Siddhartha believe he would be enlightened that day? (he had five dreams that indicated he would be enlightened, and as he threw the tray he thought it would go upstream if he were to be enlightened that day, and it did go upstream)
5. Why did Mara approach Siddhartha? (he wanted to prevent Siddhartha from being enlightened)
6. How did Siddhartha look at Mara? (with love and compassion, like a father looking at a son)

What the Buddha said:

“Sukkhāṃ yāva jarā silaṃ, sukhā saddhā patitṭhitā, sukho paññaya paṭilabho, pāpānaṃ akaraṇaṃ sukhaṃ.”

“Good is virtue until life’s end, good is faith that is steadfast, good is the acquisition of wisdom, and good is the avoidance of evil.”

Dhammapada 333 (23:14)

Dharma Discussion – Belief:

Did you find anything in this story hard to believe?

What did you think about the tree spirit, and a belief in tree spirits granting wishes? Did that seem strange to you? And what did you think about the unusual events regarding the milk, and about the snake deity who received the tray, and the tray going upstream? What about Mara, and the illusions he created? And the thundering and roaring sound from the earth? Did you find these difficult to believe?

Many people don't believe in such things, calling them "fairy tales." When they hear such stories in their religion, they often turn away from religion.

How do we separate what is real from what is imagination; how do we know what is fact and what is fiction?

Most people believe only what can be perceived with the five senses or with tools and scientific instruments—such as microscopes, telescopes, cameras, and receivers—that help us perceive what is too tiny, hidden or far away to see or hear with our eyes and ears alone.

This is how we perceive the physical world—the world that we can perceive with the body, the five senses.

Because in our culture, we believe in science.

In modern times, we have more and more wonderful scientific instruments and people devoted to discovering our physical world, so we understand that whatever can be proven in science establishes what is true.

And we have so many interesting movies, videogames and stories based on science fiction, fantasy and imagination, and we all know that they are not real.

So we are taught to believe only in what we can see with our eyes and hear with our ears, and what we understand from science, and not anything else.

But some people sense other beings—metaphysical, supernatural or spiritual beings—that other people don't perceive with their five senses.

Many monks, priests, holy persons others, not only Buddhist but also of most other religions and cultures, since ancient times and even now, see or hear beings such as gods, angels, ghosts, and other spirits.

And many people observe things that don't seem possible.

But they don't talk about it with everyone, knowing they might not believe them. Understanding this helps us realize that the physical world isn't the only reality.

Even science has found new things that seem not in the physical world, that we can't observe directly even with scientific instruments. Can you think of any examples? Some examples are dark matter, dark energy, and black holes.

We believe they exist because of their effects on objects that can be observed with scientific instruments.

Similarly, we can believe in the Dharma because of its effects on ourselves, and on other people, that we can observe.

Do you ever notice how practicing the Dharma affects you, or people you know? We can observe the peace that we feel from practicing mindfulness or meditation. We can observe the kindness, generosity and helpfulness that we see in people who genuinely practice the Dharma.

But what about the events in the story? Should we believe them?

It may be that some events and details in stories about the Buddha, which are 2,600 years old, were added or changed over time and with different translations. But it doesn't matter if we don't know for sure whether all the events in the stories really happened. We don't have to believe everything in the stories.

The most important parts of the story are the Dharma teachings—what we can learn and practice to make our lives, others' lives and the world better, kinder, and more meaningful.

There is no reason to throw out the Dharma, the precious teachings, just because we can't prove that all the stories are true.

In stories that you know are fiction, that you know are not true, do you sometimes find something in those stories that teach you something important?

Yes, we all do.

Stories are interesting ways to explain things to people.

So in Buddhism, too, we enjoy the stories, as they are entertaining, and we focus on what we can learn from them.

We let the teachings of the stories help us have a happier life and future lives.

Activity:

Make a tiny golden tray from a plastic lid, or from a tiny cardboard box. Cut decorative paper, such as glitter paper or wrapping paper, in appropriate shapes to line the inside, and the inner and outer edges. Then glue them to line the lid or box and cover the inner and outer edges. Next, decorate the tray by sticking on small decorative jewels and/or sequins.