

Chula Panthaka the Dullard

During the time of the Buddha, in the city of Rajagaha (also called Rajagriha, now called Rajgir) in northeast India, lived a daughter of a rich merchant. When she was a teenager, her parents gave her an apartment on the seventh story of the family's palace, and arranged security guards to protect her.

Living alone and isolated in her apartment, she fell in love with one of her servants. She knew her parents would be terribly upset about it, because they intended for her to marry a wealthy, successful young man of their high social class. They definitely would put a stop to her relationship with the servant. So, she told her servant boyfriend,

"There is no way that we can continue living here. If my mother and father discover my misconduct in having a relationship with you, they will tear me apart. Let's go live elsewhere."

Taking a few necessary things that they could carry by hand, they left the palace and agreed, "It doesn't matter much where we go, so long as we go and live where others will know nothing about us."

The couple then traveled together and found a place to live, and settled into their new residence as husband and wife. A few months later, the young woman discovered that she was going to have a baby. When the time was getting close for her to deliver her baby, she said to her husband,

"If I give birth to my child in a place far away from my family, it will bring suffering to both of us. There is only one place for us to go, and that is home to my parents."

Her husband, fearing that if he went there he would be killed, postponed the day of their departure. He postponed it again and again, saying "We'll go later today," or "We'll go tomorrow."

The wife thought to herself, "This simpleton realizes the enormity of his offense in falling in love with me and therefore dares not go. But after all, a mother and father are one's best friends. Let this fellow go or not, in any case I intend to go to my parents."

While her husband was out of the house, she informed her next-door neighbors that she was going home to her parents, and started traveling down the road. When her husband returned to the house and found that she wasn't home, he asked the neighbors where she had gone. When the neighbors told him that she had gone home to her parents, he ran down the road as fast as he could and eventually caught up with her. Suddenly, by the side of the road with her husband near her, she gave birth to her baby, a son.

He asked, "What shall we do now?"

She replied, "The reason for my going home to my parents has already happened on the way. Why, therefore, should we go there? Let's return to our own home."

The couple and their baby returned to their house. Since their son had been born along the way, they gave him the name Panthaka which means wayman. A few months later, the wife again became pregnant. She again wanted to go home to her parents for the birth, so she left to go to her parents, her husband ran after her, and when he caught up to her, she gave birth to a second son. Since this child also was born on the road, they gave him the name Chula Panthaka, which means little wayman. They returned to their house carrying their two sons, the newborn Chula Panthaka and the older one, now called Maha Panthaka, or big wayman.

When Maha Panthaka became a few years older, he heard other boys talk about their uncles and grandparents, and asked, "Mother, other boys talk about their grandfather and grandmother. Don't we have any relatives?"

His mother replied, "Yes, my son. You have no relatives living here, but you have a grandfather, a rich merchant, living in Rajagaha, and we have many other relatives living there, too."

The son asked, "Why don't we go there, mother?"

She evaded telling her son why she didn't go there. But both of her young sons asked again and again. Finally, she said to her husband,

"These children are tiring me out. Will my mother and father eat us alive when they see us? Come, why not let the children see the family of their grandparents?"

The husband responded, "I wouldn't dare meet them face to face, but I'll escort you there."

She said, "Very well, some way must be found by which the children can see their grandparents."

So, the couple took their children to Rajagaha, and the wife sent a messenger to her parents that she and her children had arrived. When her parents received this message, they said to each other,

"As we have passed through lifetime after lifetime, perhaps we have not previously had a son or daughter; but these two have grievously offended against us, and so we will not let them stand in our sight. Let these two take as much money as they need and go and live in some pleasant place. However, let them send the children here."

A messenger was sent to the couple with the money from the wife's parents. The couple took the money and gave the two boys to the messenger to be taken to their grandparents. So, this is how the children came to be brought up in the house of their grandparents.

Chula Panthaka was still very young, but Maha Panthaka went with his grandfather often to hear the Buddha teach the Dharma. As a result of the frequent trips to see the Buddha, he wanted to become a monk. So he said to his grandfather,

“If you would give me your permission, I would like to be ordained as a monk.”

The grandfather responded, “Dear grandson, there is no one in the whole world whose ordination would give me so much pleasure as your own. If you are able to do so, by all means become a monk!”

The grandfather took Maha Panthaka to the Buddha and told him that his grandson desires to become a monk. So, the Buddha asked one of his monks to ordain the boy as a novice monk. The monk instructed the boy to meditate on the first five of 32 parts of the body, and then ordained him. The boy learned by heart a considerable portion of the Dharma the Buddha was teaching and stayed during the rainy season with the monks. He diligently practiced meditation and after some time he attained enlightenment as an arahant. As he passed his time in the bliss of deep meditation, he thought to himself, “Surely it is in the power of Chula Panthaka to experience the same bliss.” So, he went to his grandfather and asked permission for his younger brother to be ordained as a monk.

The grandfather agreed, especially because he loved the Buddha’s teaching and because he was very ashamed whenever people saw him with his grandsons and asked which of his daughters was their mother, he had to say that they were the sons of his daughter who ran away.

So the older brother brought his younger brother Chula Panthaka to be ordained. But once the younger brother became a monk, it became clear that he was not very intelligent. Even after four months, he was unable to memorize this single stanza:

Even as the red lotus sweetly scented
Appears in the morning full bloomed, replete with scent
Behold the Buddha, Angirasa, resplendent
Blazing like the sun in the sky.

It was told that in his past life during the time of the previous Buddha, called Buddha Kassapa, Chula Panthaka had great wisdom, but that after becoming a monk, he ridiculed and made fun of a certain monk who was not very intelligent and called him a dullard even as he was trying to learn the Dharma. This monk, embarrassed by the ridicule, was unable to learn a teaching by heart or even to repeat it. As a result of that act of ridiculing the other monk, when Chula Panthaka was born, he had lower intelligence, and every sentence he learned made the sentence he had learned before disappear from his memory. Indeed, four months had passed while he was striving to learn this one stanza.

Therefore, Maha Panthaka said to his brother, "Chula Panthaka, it's not in your power to master this religion. In four months, you have not been able to learn a single stanza. How can you ever hope to reach the goal of the religious life? Leave the monastery at once!"

But Chula Panthaka was sincerely attached to the teaching of the Buddha and the last thing in the world he wished to do was to leave the monks and return to the life of a householder.

Around that time, a medical doctor called Jivaka, bringing a big bunch of flower garlands and various kinds of perfumes, went to listen to the Buddha teaching the Dharma. Afterward, he approached Maha Panthaka and asked,

"Reverend sir, how many monks are living with the Buddha?"

Maha Panthaka replied, "Five hundred."

Jivaka said, "Tomorrow, reverend sir, bring the five hundred monks and the Buddha and take a meal at our house."

Maha Panthaka replied, "The monk Chula Panthaka is a dullard and has made no progress in the Dharma. I accept the invitation for all except him."

When Chula Panthaka heard that, he thought to himself, "He accepts an invitation for all these monks, but in accepting it, he deliberately leaves me out. Beyond a doubt my brother's affection for me is gone. Of what good to me is this religion now? I will return to the life of a householder and spend my days giving offerings and doing other works of merit."

So, on the following day very early in the morning, he left the monastery with the intention of returning to life as a householder.

Meanwhile, at the same time, the Buddha surveyed the world, and saw Chula Panthaka on his way out of the monastery. The Buddha went out and, arriving at the monastery gate before Chula Panthaka, walked back and forth on the same road that Chula Panthaka intended to take.

When Chula Panthaka saw the Buddha, he approached and bowed to him, and the Buddha said, "Chula Panthaka, where are you going at this hour of the day?"

The young monk replied, "Reverend sir, my brother has expelled me, and therefore I intend to return to the householder's life."

The Buddha said, "Chula Panthaka, it was at my hands that you became a monk. Therefore, when your brother expelled you, why didn't you come to me? Come now, what have you to do with the life of a householder? You shall remain with me."

The Buddha touched him on the head, and led him back inside the gate and seated him just outside the Buddha's meditation hut, which was called the Perfumed Chamber. He then created by his supernatural power a perfectly clean cloth and gave it to Chula Panthaka, saying,

"Chula Panthaka, remain right here, face toward the east, rub this cloth, and say as you do so, 'Dirt-remover! Dirt remover!'"

Just then, meal-time was announced, and the Buddha along with the other monks went to Jivaka's house.

Chula Panthaka, meanwhile, sat near the Perfumed Chamber, facing the sun, and rubbed the cloth, saying "Dirt remover! Dirt remover!" As he rubbed the cloth, it became dirty. He thought, "This cloth was perfectly clean before, but through this body of mine it has lost its original character and has become soiled. Impermanent, indeed, are all conditioned things!" He deeply contemplated decay and death, and from that he developed insight.

While seated at Jivaka's house, the Buddha, knowing that Chula Panthaka had attained insight, said directly to his mind, "Chula Panthaka, think not that only a piece of cloth has become soiled and dyed with impurity. Indeed, within you are attachment, impurity, and other defilements; remove them." And, sending forth a luminous image of himself, the Buddha sat in front of him and said,

Attachment, not dust, is dirt truly called,
To be attached is the term "dirt" truly given;
Having abandoned this dirt, O monks,
Live in the Teaching of one free from dirt.

Hate, not dust, is dirt truly called.
To hate is the term "dirt" truly given;
Having abandoned this dirt, O monks,
Live in the Teaching of one free from dirt.

Delusion, not dust, is dirt truly called,
To delusion is the term "dirt" truly given;
Having abandoned this dirt, O monks,
Live in the Teaching of one free from dirt.

At the conclusion of these stanzas, Chula Panthaka became an arahant and also acquired supernatural powers and analytical knowledge of the Dharma.

In another previous life, Chula Panthaka had been a king, who, when making a ceremonial ride around the city, had sweat pouring down his forehead and when he wiped it with a clean cloth, it became dirty. Looking at the cloth, he thought, "By reason of this body of mine, a cloth so clean as this has lost its former character and become soiled. Impermanent, indeed, are all

conditioned things!” At that point, he understood the concept of impermanence. So, in his later life as Chula Panthaka, the same “dirt remover” concept had a deep effect on him, and liberated him from ignorance.

Meanwhile, at Jivaka’s house, when Jivaka approached the Buddha to offer water, the Buddha said, “Jivaka, are there no monks at the monastery?”

Instead of waiting for Jivaka’s reply, Maha Panthaka instead replied, “No, reverend sir, there are no monks at the monastery.”

The Buddha said, “But Jivaka, there are!”

Jivaka said, “Very well,” and sent a man to the monastery to find out.

At that moment, Chula Panthaka, although he was still at the Perfumed Chamber, knew what his brother told the Buddha and said to himself, “My brother says, ‘There are no monks at the monastery.’ I will show him that there are monks at the monastery.” And then by his supernatural power, he created an image of the whole area being filled with monks. Some of them were making robes, others were dyeing robes, and others were reciting sacred teachings.

After Jivaka’s messenger arrived and saw all the monks, he returned and told Jivaka, “Noble sir, the entire mango grove is full of monks.”

The Buddha said to the messenger, “Go to the monastery and say, ‘The Buddha summons Chula Panthaka.’”

The man went there and said what he was told to say. Then the thousand monks there cried out, “I am Chula Panthaka! I am Chula Panthaka!”

The man returned to the Buddha and said, “Reverend sir, they all say that they are Chula Panthaka.”

The Buddha said, “Well, then, go and take by the hand the first monk that says ‘I am Chula Panthaka,’ and the rest will disappear.”

The man did so, and immediately the other monks disappeared. The actual Chula Panthaka returned with the messenger to the Buddha.

At the end of the meal, the Buddha said, “Jivaka, take Chula Panthaka’s bowl, and he will speak the words of appreciation to you.”

Jivaka took his bowl, as was the custom, and Chula Panthaka gave an outstanding Dharma teaching, like a young lion roaring a lion’s roar.

Some days later, the monks were having a discussion in the meditation hall, noting that in four months, Chula Panthaka was unable to learn a four-line stanza, but because he never relaxed his effort, he became an arahant and a master of the Dharma.

The Buddha walked in and asked what they were discussing, and when they told him, he said, “Monks, a monk of diligent effort in my teaching cannot fail to make himself master of the Dharma that transcends all worlds.” He continued with the following stanza:

By energy and heedfulness.
By taming and by self-control,
The wise man should make an isle
That no flood can overwhelm.

Dharma Discussion – Intelligence, Wisdom and Doubt:

This story might bring to mind some doubts and questions.

One doubt is whether the Dharma is suitable for everyone. Is it only for people with a higher level of intelligence? If so, then is Buddhism an elitist religion?

Also, on a related note, why are people born with greater or lesser intelligence?

A second doubt is about supernatural powers. The Buddha manifesting a cloth, and Chula Panthaka manifesting a thousand monks and hearing the Buddha and his brother speak although they were far away, are all inconsistent with science.

A third doubt is whether a person can reach enlightenment as quickly as the brothers in this story.

As to the first doubt—is Dharma practice suitable for everyone, or only for people with greater than average intelligence?

It’s true that Buddhism includes many complex concepts that are difficult for ordinary people to grasp, such as some teachings of the Abhidhamma.

Also, the Buddha himself was concerned, when he first became enlightened, that the Dharma is difficult to understand and is for the wise to experience, and that if he taught the Dharma, others wouldn’t understand him. Then Brahma Sahampati, a being from the Brahma heaven world, advised him to teach the Dharma, and said that there are beings with “little dust in their eyes”—that is, only a little ignorance—and some of them will understand the Dharma. Then the Buddha saw for himself with his divine vision that there were beings with very little ignorance and beings with more ignorance, beings with good qualities and beings who had bad qualities, and beings who were easy to teach and beings who were difficult to teach. And, he compared them to lotus plants—some growing in the water without rising above it, others that grow and rest on the surface of the water, and lotuses that grow rising up above the water, not getting wet. Majjhima Nikaya 26, Paragraphs 19-21.

We can reason that lotus plants that are growing under the water have not developed and matured enough to rise to the surface, and others that have developed and matured further are able to bloom above the water. Individual lotus plants may appear less developed or more developed but really are all the same—all have the potential to bloom above the surface when they have matured. Similarly, individual people have a less developed or more developed intellect, but actually they all have the same potential to develop a high level of intelligence and to mature in wisdom. However, this takes multiple lifetimes of development. Someone of great intellect has had many lifetimes with opportunities to develop it, and someone of lesser intelligence hasn't yet had those opportunities. So, there is no basis for a person with a more developed intellect to feel superior, just as person who has graduated college doesn't feel superior to a young child in kindergarten. We all were at the beginner level before.

When the Buddha thought that the Dharma would be too difficult for people to understand, he was referring to dependent origination and the “stilling of all formations . . . the destruction of craving . . . nirvana . . . the Dharma that even [he] found hard to reach” (Majjhima Nikaya 26 Paragraph 19), the highest levels of wisdom that he had attained. When he then traveled around and gave Dharma discourses, he didn't teach at those high levels of wisdom. Ordinary people wanted to offer him food and receive his blessings, and he taught at a level suitable for them so they would be able to understand. For example, many verses he taught that later were compiled in the Dhammapada are easily understood by average people. And, he taught everyone to develop virtues such as generosity, lovingkindness, truthfulness, helping others, and patience. Anyone with any level of intelligence can be kind, patient, helpful and so forth, and this accumulates merit. And, merit leads to wisdom; it's the cause for a healthy, long and peaceful life with conditions suitable for learning and practicing the Dharma and developing wisdom. So, anyone can practice Buddhism, and isn't elitist.

What about Chula Panthaka's intelligence? He had great wisdom in a previous lifetime but had impaired intelligence when born as Chula Panthaka due to his negative karma of ridiculing another monk. So, we see that one's bad karma can temporarily impair one's intelligence, perhaps manifesting as a brain injury, learning disability, cognitive disorder, mental illness, autism, or dementia. But the intelligence that was developed in previous lives will be restored, at least in future lives.

Chula Panthaka during his lifetime was able to restore not only his intelligence but also his wisdom from prior lives, when he earned merit as a monk.

What is the difference between intelligence and wisdom?

Intelligence is the capability for learning and reasoning, including memorizing, problem-solving, and acquiring skills and knowledge useful for living in society, in the physical world.

Wisdom is insight and understanding the mind, the nature of the mind, who we really are, what reality is, and ultimate truth. It's different from understanding the mind in terms of psychology, which concerns interaction with other people and ability to function in society. Wisdom arises as the mind becomes pure—free of ignorance, attachment and aversion, and the unpleasant emotions associated with them, such as jealousy, arrogance and ill-will—as a result of the study, contemplation and practice of spiritual teachings.

People can be intelligent but not wise, for example when they are too greedy for material things and make bad decisions.

As we see from this story, wisdom developed in past lives is not lost upon death but is carried into future lives.

As to the second doubt, about supernatural powers, why should we believe that the Buddha manifested a cloth, that Chula Panthaka manifested an image of a thousand monks, and that he heard his brother and the Buddha speak although they were far away? How can an intelligent person in today's world believe this when it's not consistent with science?

People don't believe in supernatural or supernormal powers because they have never seen or experienced such powers, and many individuals who claim to have them are frauds. Folks prefer to follow the conventional, popular view that science establishes everything that is true, and anything that cannot be perceived with the five senses and scientific tools, or proven with scientific methods, is imaginary. People often criticize others as foolish, naïve or gullible to believe in anything supernatural, influencing others not to believe in it.

Of course, we have great respect for science, which has enriched our world so much, providing discoveries and advancements in medicine, technology, communication, transportation, agriculture and many other fields of knowledge.

While we take scientific knowledge as truth, that doesn't mean that scientific knowledge is the only truth that exists.

Indeed, countless people from ancient to modern times in cultures all over the world have experiences or abilities that cannot be explained by science.

For example, many people have near-death experiences, out-of-body experiences, or psychic abilities such as knowing something before it happens, clairvoyance, or clairaudience.

They can't all be lying, delusional, or making up stories. And many have no incentive to lie or make up stories.

People who have these abilities don't want or need to prove themselves to anyone who wants to debunk them by, for example, challenging them to show their supernatural abilities on public media or by challenging them to choose a winning lottery number. Can you imagine what would happen if they did accept such challenges? They would be mobbed by people wanting them to use their supernatural powers for selfish or harmful purposes. Therefore, most people who have acquired psychic or supernormal abilities exercise discretion to use them only for limited purposes and in limited contexts. Indeed, the Buddha instructed his students generally not to display supernormal powers.

Also, now that we have so many advanced technologies upon which we are dependent, and, especially with the internet, we are used to getting easy, immediate results for whatever we want. So, we don't have the need, interest, time or patience to develop our mental and psychic powers as people did a thousand or more years ago.

In any event, it's not necessary to believe the supernatural events narrated in the stories of Buddha in order to benefit from the Dharma. Just as we don't have to believe stories that our fitness trainer can lift a car with his bare hands in order to enjoy the benefits of fitness from his instructions, we don't have to believe in the super powers of the Buddha to get the benefits of training our mind according to his teachings. We can observe for ourselves the benefits—for example, more peace, compassion, resilience, awareness, and ability to handle the challenges in our lives—and that can give us confidence in the Buddha's teachings.

As to the third doubt, it's hard to believe that a person could reach enlightenment as quickly as the brothers in this story. Actually, there are many examples in the stories of the Buddha of people attaining levels of enlightenment after hearing him teach only one time. How was that possible?

One reason is that they had a lot of merit—good karmas—and wisdom accumulated in many past lives. The accumulation of merit and wisdom leads to enlightenment.

A second reason is being in the presence of the Buddha. He had such extreme wisdom and power that for many people, just being near him relaxed and opened their minds so they could easily understand the deep meaning of his teaching, even if it was just a few words.