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**WISDOM OF**  
**BUDDHIST**  
**TALES**

Philosophical exercises

## THE AUTHORS

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## THE BOOK

Should we seek to know everything? Are we responsible for what is happening to us? Can we control our emotions? Should we suffer in order to realize ourselves? Is the essential urgent? To address these questions, 20 stories are proposed, which emanate from the Buddhist tradition, in India: tales, parables, or Jatakas that tell the many lives of the Buddha. Then come ten questions, in order to deepen the meaning of the various narratives and interpret their content. Ten

more questions invite us to meditate on more general issues emanating from these texts. Through this anthology, the reader is invited to discover the depth and subtlety of original Buddhist thought.

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## *1/ The man wounded by the arrow*

### **Should we try to know everything?**

There was a monk who was thinking a lot and meditated on the fourteen difficult questions such as "Is the self eternal or temporal? ", " Is the world finite or infinite? ", " Can we be really wise during our life or only after death? ", etc. But he felt he could not manage to deal satisfactorily with these issues, and experienced some frustration.

One morning, he put on his robe and took his begging bowl, went to Buddha and declared:

- If you can explain these fourteen difficult questions and satisfy my intelligence, I will remain your disciple. If you cannot answer me, I will seek another path.

The Blessed One replied:

- In the beginning, did we agree that if I explained those fourteen difficult questions, you would be my disciple?

- No, answered the monk.

- Then how can you claim today that if I don't explain them, you will not remain my disciple? Don't you see that it's for humans affected with old age, sickness and death that I preach the law, in order to save them? These fourteen difficult questions are subjects

of strife; they do not benefit the law and they are just idle talk. Why ask me these questions? Anyway, if I answered, you would not understand. Furthermore, fool that you are, when comes the time of death, you would not be able to free yourself from birth, old age, disease, and from death itself!

As the monk did not answer, The Awakened continued:

- Let me tell you a story. A man was struck with a poisoned arrow. His family called for a

doctor. When he arrived, the wounded man forewarned him: "I will not let you extract the arrow from my body before I know what is your clan, your name, your family, your village, your father and mother, and your age. Also, I want to learn from which area the arrow comes from, what is the nature of its wood and its feathers, who made the arrowhead and with which metal. Then I want to know if the bow was made of mountain wood or of animal horn. And also, I want to know the origin of the remedy you plan to use, and what is its name. When I will have learned all these things, I will allow you to extract the arrow and apply the remedy.

The Buddha asked the monk:

- Can this man know all these things and only afterwards let the doctor remove the arrow?

- Of course not! replied the monk. If he expected to know everything, he would die before the operation even started.

- You are like him, replied the Awakened, the arrow of false views, coated with the poison of lust and pride, has pierced your mind. I want to tear out this arrow, you who are my disciple. But you refuse that I remove it! You prefer to determine if the self is eternal or temporal, the world finite or infinite, and what else! You will

not find what you seek, but you will lose there your wisdom. You will die like an animal and will be thrown into the darkness.

### ***Some questions to deepen and prolong***

#### **Comprehension**

- Is it possible to answer difficult questions satisfactorily?
- Why is the monk blackmailing the Buddha?
- Why does the Buddha call the monk a fool?
- Why does the Buddha tell the monk he "will die like an animal"?
- Does the man really want to heal?
- Why are the issues of the monk difficult?
- Does the monk behave like a true disciple?
- Why does the monk want answers to his questions?
- What is the problem of the monk, according to the Buddha?
- Why does the monk think the Buddha will answer the questions?

#### **Reflection**

- Is the human being a dissatisfied animal?
- Is patience a Virtue?
- Should we seek to know everything?
- Can knowledge be fruitless?
- Why do we want answers to our questions?
- Does knowledge necessarily lead to happiness?
- Why is uncertainty painful?
- Can we be truly satisfied?
- Why do we need to know?
- Is knowledge the most important human value?

## *2/ Mokelu the stupid*

### **Should we share knowledge?**

Five hundred monks lived in a temple located ten kilometers away from the city. One of them, elderly, called Mokelu, was known for his stupidity. Regardless of the efforts to teach him something, he could not understand. He could not even recite a single proverb. The others looked down at him. Nobody liked to be with him, and Mokelu was lonely.

One day the king invited the monks to his palace for a reception. Mokelu, ashamed of his stupidity, was afraid to join the feast and went not. But as soon as everyone had gone, he felt very sad. He was angry with everyone and himself. He found a rope and went under a large tree to end his life.

At this very time, the Buddha appeared before him and harshly chided him:

- Mokelu, instead of cultivating yourself seriously and discovering your shortcomings, you're doing a really stupid thing.

Mokelu, astonished, was speechless. The Awaken Being continued:

- In your previous life, you were a practitioner with immense knowledge, wide and deep. But you did not want to teach others.

You were arrogant and rejected those who approached you. That is why, accordingly, you're stupid in this life. You cannot blame the others for that. You just have to repent of your evil deeds. And to put an end to your life is anyhow not to put an end to your crimes.

The words of the Lord touched Mokelu: he felt even more stupid, and ashamed. He knelt down and repented for all his misdeeds.

The Buddha then patiently taught the Law and inspired the monk's mind. He awoke and wisdom enlightened him. The Enlightened knew then Mokelu was awake and ordered him to join the King's rally in order to teach the law to all those present. He added:

- You had five hundred disciples in your old life. It is they who are in the king's palace. So go there as soon as possible, since they await your advice.

Having bid farewell to Buddha, Mokelu arrived at the palace. The festival was about to begin. Mokelu saw an empty seat on the dais. He settled there without any hesitation. When all saw his behavior, they thought Mokelu had gone crazy, but no one said a word, especially before the king.

Once the meal was over, Mokelu fearlessly stood up and solemnly began teaching the law to the five hundred monks and others at the rally, with a sweet and touching voice. All admired him. But the five hundred monks also experienced shame. They really had thought Mokelu was stupid. In reality, he was an awaken being, but he too did not know.

## ***Some questions to deepen and prolong***

### **Comprehension**

- Why did Mokelu not understand anything?
- Why did monks reject Mokelu?
- Is Mokelu a mirror for the other monks?
- Is Mokelu right to be ashamed of his stupidity?
- Why is Mokelu angry with everyone and himself?
- Does Mokelu really want to commit suicide?
- Why does Buddha scold Mokelu?
- Why does Buddha want Mokelu to repent for his mistakes?
- Why do the monks say nothing when Mokelu sits on the dais?
- What did Mokelu finally understand?

### **Reflection**

- Why do we find stupidity unbearable?
- Why are we ashamed to be stupid?
- Are we all stupid?
- Why don't we love people different from us?
- Is each one free to decide about his life and death?
- Must we share our knowledge with others?
- Should we always repent of our "bad" actions?
- Is it possible to accept ourselves as we are, without regret or judgment?
- Is the one who knows superior to others?



### *3/ Reflections in the jar*

#### **Is identity an illusion?**

The son of a notable had just married; the couple loved each other and thought highly of their relation. The husband said to his wife: "Go to the kitchen and take in the big jar some wine that you will bring so we can clink glasses." The woman complied and opened the jar. But she saw in that jar a reflection of herself and immediately thought that there was another woman there. Very angry, she returned to her husband: "You already had a wife; but you hid her in the jar and then you came to ask me for wedlock. "

Taken aback, the husband came himself to the kitchen to see what this was all about. He opened the amphora and saw his own image. He returned to his wife and inveighed strongly against her, accusing her of having hidden a man in there. Both were mad at each other, each convinced he was right.

Meanwhile, a Brahmin came to visit the couple. Noticing the tension, he asked what was the cause of the dispute. Puzzled, he went in turn to look at the jar: he also saw his own image. He was angry against the son the notable that, he thought, had hidden one of his friends in the amphora and then pretended to quarrel with his wife. He immediately left the couple.

Later, a nun who was used to receive offerings from the notable came by and heard about the quarrel. She wanted to see the jar for herself, to her great surprise saw a nun in the jar. She did not utter a word and retired, also very angry.

A wise man who was visiting the couple, curious about this story, wanted to look, but he quickly understood that what was seen was a mere reflection. He sighed:

- The men of this world, ignorant and stupid, take the void to reality.

So he called the man and his wife to come together in order to look. He told them:

- For you, I will chase away all the people who are in the jar.

He then lifted a large rock and broke the jar.

Once the wine got spilled, there was nothing left. Immediately, the intelligence of those two people was untied: they understood that they had been facing a vulgar reflection of their own person, and they both felt a great embarrassment.

## ***Some questions to deepen and prolong***

### **Comprehension**

- Why did couple quarrel so easily?
- Can we say that the couple that " they thought highly of their relation "?
- Why did the characters see their reflection rather than see the wine?
- Why did the Brahmin and the nun get upset?
- Why do the different characters not recognize themselves in their reflection?
- How does the wise man know that what he sees is a mere reflection?
- How is the intelligence of the couple "untied"?
- Why is the couple embarrassed at the end of the story?
- Why is each of the characters convinced he is right?
- Was it essential to break the jar in order for consciousness to arise?

### **Reflection**

- Is Descartes right to claim that: "Common sense is the widely shared thing in the world "?
- What prevails in humans, reason or emotions?
- What is the main cause of anger?
- Why do we let ourselves be deceived by appearances?
- Why do we get angry rather than try to understand?
- Does love make people beings susceptible?
- Can wisdom be a form of violence?
- What defines reality?
- Can we recognize ourselves?
- Do we project ourselves in everything we perceive?

## *4/ Kandata and the spider*

### **Are we responsible of what happens to us?**

There once was a man named Kandata, a criminal endowed with a cold heart and a rare cruelty. Thief, swindler, manipulator, assassin, he ended up passing away in a violent death. He found himself in the darkness of hell, sometimes to wallow in a lake of blood, sometimes to walk barefoot on a spiny mountain. Around him, darkness stretched to infinity, in an ocean of pain.

Above, somewhere in the sky, a spider saw him. It went to find Buddha, the being of absolute light and awakening, and said:

- Kandata is worth saving. By one single good action, one day, he saved the tiny insect that I am. Instead of crushing me, he left me alive.

The Buddha did not answer, but nodded. So the small spider wove a long thread that she let down into the well, deep into the abyss. Kandata, bent under the weight of pain, suffering with all his soul, looking up, suddenly noticed a glow. A tiny dot of light shone all the way up there. He also noticed a thin silver wire, gleaming in the dark. The heart full of hope, he burst out laughing and exclaimed:

- I finally found the way out of here!

He pulled on the wire, which seemed strangely solid. He began to climb by sheer arms strength toward the bright spot that was visible far above him.

- I'll get there, thought the villain, no one can stop me! Here is my chance to escape from this hell!

He rose, slowly, relentlessly, painfully enduring the effort. But the spot of light still seemed so far away.

- I'll get there! I'll get there! he repeated through his gritted teeth. Quicker! Faster! I must make it!

Suddenly he was invaded by a strong doubt.

- How long have I been climbing? Will this thread withstand my weight throughout the whole ascent? Will I succeed to go until the end?

He was seized with a terrible anguish and, for the first time, he looked down. He was terrified by what he saw. Many others like him, attracted to the light, crowded together and fought to catch the thread. Some were already beginning to climb. He shouted furiously:

- It is I who saw it first! Stop, do not approach, get off!

But the others, desperate, enraged, did not listen. Their number even grew.

Kandata hastened to climb harder, when he suddenly noticed that one of these intruders had caught up on him. Furious, full of hate, he gave him a violent kick and the man foundered into the darkness.

- That will teach you! he yelled. This thread is for me!

The Buddha saw his action. His heart filled up with compassion and sadness, but he did not speak.

However, the spider understood and cut the wire.

## ***Some questions to deepen and prolong***

### **Comprehension**

- Did Kandata receive what he deserved?
- Why is Kandata so cruel?
- Is Kandata condemned to remain cruel?
- Is Kandata aware of what he is?
- Why does Kandata doubt at some point?
- Is Kandata responsible for what happens to him?
- Is the spider naive?
- Could Buddha guess what was going to happen?
- Why does Buddha accept the proposal of the spider?
- Does Kandata represent the human being in general?

### **Reflection**

- Is salvation exclusively a religious concept?
- Does salvation depend on oneself or on an external intervention?
- Can things be other than they are?
- Are we condemned to ourselves?
- Do we determine our actions or are we determined by them?
- Is there a "natural" justice?
- Are there good beings and evil beings?
- Is morality in contradiction with survival instinct?
- Can a human be inhuman?
- Should compassion be without limits?

## *5/ You are right, you too!*

### **Can we be certain of what we say?**

The teacher had just finished a complicated explanation of some difficult concepts. A long silence ensued. Some monks ventured to speak, unsure of themselves, then slowly growing bolder, they expressed opinions about what had been said, seeking above all

to obtain the approval of the master for what they understood. As the master said nothing, all of those who took the floor ended by categorically affirming the truthfulness of their own words. Finally, broke a lively theoretical argument between two monks particularly stubborn and verbose. As neither could convince his opponent, they

decided by mutual agreement to refer to the "authority".

The first monk developed his argument and asked the master what he thought.

After a moment of hesitation, the elder replied laconically:

- Indeed, you are right.

The young man was delighted with the response, took a knowing look, cast a victorious glance at his opponent and left the room. The second monk, somewhat destabilized by this approval, launched himself into a long demonstration to defend his view of the master's vision. This one listened patiently until the end, hesitated a moment,

before concluding in the exact same way:

- Certainly, you're right.

The monk, reassured, was delighted and immediately left the room.

A third monk, who had followed the whole discussion without saying anything, very surprised by the two successive and contradictory approvals of the master, called out:

- I do not understand, master. Both theses you have heard are completely opposite. They cannot be both true at the same time! How can you tell these two monks that they both are right? "

The master looked at him, smiling, nodded and answered:

- You are right too!

## ***Some questions to deepen and prolong***

### **Comprehension**

- Why do the Monk seek the approval of the master?
- Why is silence of the master interpreted as acquiescence?
- Why does each monk want to convince his opponent?
- Why does the first monk take a "knowing look"?
- Why does the master tell both monks that they are right?
- Does the master lack a sense of logic?
- Why does the master smile when answering the third monk?
- Was the master mocking the monks?
- What does the master want to accomplish?
- Is the third monk different from the first two?

### **Reflection**

- Can we legitimately state "to each his own truth"?
- Is certainty a guarantee of truth?
- Is a good proof sufficient to make something true?
- Do we prove we are right by persuading others?
- Can we be at the same time right and wrong?
- Can two opposing views be true simultaneously?
- Are all discourses problematic?
- Can there be different logics?
- Are logic and dialectic opposed?
- Can a proposal be absolutely true?

## 6/ Angulimala

### Can we escape our destiny?

There was a Brahmin, an adviser to the king, who had a son. As he was a superstitious man, he carefully examined the various omens in order to know what would happen to his heir, so he would take the right decisions. But he learned with horror that his offspring would later on become very violent. To prevent this disaster, he named his son Ahimsaka, which means innocent. In addition, he taught him to always be obedient, so as not to break the rules of decorum. The child learned respect; he was a hardworking and brilliant student, to the great satisfaction of his parents. When he was old enough to study, they decided to send him far away to a reputable guru. Before leaving, his father did not fail to remind him to scrupulously obey his master.

The youth confirmed the expectations of his family, as he continued to study well, being disciplined and studious. Alas, his qualities finally attracted the jealousy of his fellow students who saw in him the favorite of the teacher. They criticized his scrupulous obedience, his constant concern to satisfy the master's desires. In revenge, they started the rumor that Ahimsaka, benefiting from the power of his family, actually wanted to get

rid of the guru and take his place at the end of his studies. In addition, they made believe that he managed to seduce the wife of the master.

Came the end of the year. The tradition was that, to end his studies, every student should offer his master an important gift, matching the wishes of the latter. To avenge this "ambitious" student, the guru decided to give him a horrible task.

- You will kill a thousand people and bring back their right thumb.

He hoped this way his student would end up being killed.

This order caused uproar in the spirit of Ahimsaka, but he had been trained to obey, so he set out to accomplish the task that was entrusted to him. He went to live in the forest, killing all those passing by, merchants or pilgrims, penetrating inside villages when he found no other victims. He never stole money or property, and he stored the thumbs in a cave in which he had made its shelter.

Unfortunately, the animals ate the thumbs he had collected. Hence Ahimsaka decided to wear the thumbs of his victims as a necklace. From there came to him a new name: Angulimala, which means "collar of fingers."

The people of the area, terrified, went to the king and asked for help in order to get rid of this ferocious criminal. A troop was deployed to pursue and kill him. Angulimala's mother heard about this and decided to go see her son to warn him so he could escape. When Angulimala saw the old woman coming, he did not recognize her. He had now collected 999 thumbs and he was just lacking one in order to complete his duty. But at this point, the Buddha, who was passing by, decided to intervene despite all the warnings from the villagers. Fortunately, because Angulimala decided to kill the Lord rather than his mother, a crime which would have meant for him a thousand years of hell for matricide.

But evidently, he was never able to catch up with the Buddha, which always moved

faster than him, although walking calmly. Surprised, the criminal asked the Blessed One to stop, who replied:

- I have already stopped. It is now time for you to stop!

- I don't understand, replied the desperate being.

The Buddha then explained he had completely stopped harming living beings, when on the contrary Angulimala destroyed them. Taken aback, Angulimala became aware at once of what he was doing. He repented and decided to become a monk.

Later, when the king arrived, he learned about the conversion of the criminal, so he bowed to him like with any other monk, and even gave him a donation.

Unfortunately, the new life of the convert was not always very easy. Some farmers still much resented his past. He was often bullied when he came to beg alms.

- This is the result of your former life, the fruits of your karma, which you cannot escape. Think of what could have happened to you subsequently if you had not changed your way of life, "replied the Buddha, so to comfort him. Just be patient, practice equanimity and follow the dharma.

And thus Angulimala became a saint.



## ***Some questions to deepen and prolong***

### **Comprehension**

- Why does the Brahmin teach obedience to his son?
- Why do other students want brutalize Ahimsaka?
- Why does the guru believe the rumors?
- Could Ahimsaka not obey his master?
- Could the Father of Ahimsaka have avoided what happened to his son?
- Why cannot Angulimala catch the Buddha?
- Why did Angulimala decide to kill the Buddha rather than his mother?
- Why did the king not kill Angulimala?
- Why does Buddha advise Angulimala to follow the dharma?
- Why do the peasants brutalize Angulimala?

### **Reflection**

- Can we modify the world order?
- Do we all have a fate?
- Is obedience a virtue?
- Should we teach disobedience to children?
- What is the difficulty to become autonomous?
- Should we do what we want or accept the rules?
- Do our actions always carry consequences?
- Do our actions always have a reason to be?
- Is fate a belief or a reality?
- Is it worse to kill one's mother rather than anyone else?

## 7/ *The dispute*

### Is the other a threat?

Two tribes, each belonging to a different kingdom, lived peacefully on each side of a river. In the past, they even worked together to build a dam to irrigate their fields.

But a particularly hot and dry summer, the flow of the river came to diminish greatly, to the point that sandbanks appeared in its course, which had never happened in living memory. On both sides side, farmers were worried for their plantations because

the lack of water threatened their crops. Faced with this shortage, both tribes began to enter in competition and looked at each other with an anxious look, even threatening, which increased as the water flows dwindled. Soon, they started to hurl jeers and insults, and then it came to blows. The rumor of this dispute reached the ear of the two kings. Each consulted his generals and both decided to go to war, to honor their respective people.

The Buddha was traveling not far away, he felt the threat of violence and went to the place of the dispute. Once in the presence of the two armies, he inquired for the cause of conflict. Each of the two kings explained that the others had started by insulting them and assaulting them. The Awakened then asked what was the initial cause of these insults and these attacks, but they were unable to respond. They asked their generals, but they did not know either: they were too busy with their battle plan. Finally, they brought in the farmers who explained the origin of the drama, while of course denouncing their opponents as the origin of the conflict.

The Buddha finally asked them,

- What is the most valuable thing, water or human life?

- Human life, of course, they answered in chorus.

- So, is it not vain to kill people for water? And worse, does it make sense to kill without even knowing why? Let me tell you a story. One day, a hurricane struck the forest. Trees

which had grown close to each other and whose branches intertwined, endured the brutality of the storm. A tree that had grown alone, separated from the others, was torn apart and perished. See for yourself if you want to survive...

And Buddha walked away.

## ***Some questions to deepen and prolong***

### **Comprehension**

- Why do the both tribes end up in a fight?
- Do the two tribes really know why they fight?
- Why do the kings go to war?
- Do the kings of this story behave like kings?
- Does human life come second in this story?
- Why do the both tribes reject the fault on one another?
- Why does Buddha make both tribes responsible?
- Are circumstances the real cause of the war?
- Why does Buddha feel the violence that threatens?
- What is the main message of Buddha in this story?

### **Reflection**

- Is human life the most precious good of all?
- Do we often accuse others of being the cause of our problems?
- Why do others represents a threat?
- Do we all have the same idea of necessity?
- Is non-violence also a form of violence?
- Is non-violence always an appropriate strategy?
- Must unity always be a priority?
- Is human being prone to savagery?
- Can we say that ignorance is the main cause of our problems?
- Are we generally confused about our priorities?

## *8/ The monk who was a goldsmith*

### **Can we master our emotions?**

A monk asked his master to give him a subject of meditation.

- Certainly, answered his master. Watch the impure thoughts that arise in your mind. If you continue to observe them, you will eventually see the truth.

The monk thanked him and affirmed that he would do his best. He went under a tree and sat in a meditation position. Then, some negative thoughts arise: possession, greediness, pride, stubbornness... But after a certain time, he stopped because he could not bear anymore this exercise. He had never realized how much his mind was so full of impurities. He concluded that he was not worthy of being a monk.

When the master saw him coming back to the temple, he asked him how his meditation was going. The monk answered he had so much anger in himself that he deemed himself incapable of changing this miserable state of mind, so it was better for him to abandon his career as a monk.

Feeling sorry, not knowing what to do, the master proposed to the monk to go meet the Buddha, who was not far away. And so they went. Buddha, very perspicacious, asked the monk if he was a goldsmith before taking the robe. The other, surprised, answered affirmatively. The Awaken then took the master apart and explained to him that the monk was not able to observe his impure thoughts because having worked such a long time with gold, a very pure metal, making beautiful objects, he could only look at beautiful things. Therefore he needed to find his student a different object of meditation, something more pleasant to him. So the teacher went back to the monk, asked him to relax, and to watch a lotus bud that was floating on the pond right in front of them.

- But shouldn't I be meditating instead! exclaimed the monk.

- This is your meditation, answered the Awaken.

The monk was surprised. Nevertheless, he told himself that it was better to listen to the words of Buddha, the Being of compassion. As well, the place was rather pleasant and the idea agreeable. Thus he sat in a meditation position at the water's edge.

A little bit later in the day, he saw the bud opening up, turning into a beautiful flower that was opening and blossoming. He thought that he could contemplate such a gorgeous thing during all his life. But in the evening, the petals of the flower fell one after the other. Deceived, the monk was surprised how quickly its beauty has faded. Continuing his reflection, he came to the conclusion that if a beauty like the one of the lotus could not last, maybe the impure thoughts of his mind, less perfect, could disappear even faster. He thus decided to try observing again his bad thoughts: if he would only contemplate them, without being troubled by their nature, he would see what would happen. So he stared at his anger, his frustration and his impatience, but remained calm. He saw his emotions slowly appear and trail away. From this he understood that all things fluctuate, that nothing lasts forever. By discovering the impermanence of things, he realized that his mind

could become like the gold he used to work with before. He greeted the flower that showed this truth to him, and thanked the Buddha for his great wisdom.

### ***Some questions to deepen and prolong***

#### **Comprehension**

- What are these “impure thoughts” that arise in our mind?
- Why does the master advise the monk to watch his “impure thoughts”?
- Why the monk cannot meditate anymore?
- What stops the master from solving the problems of his student?
- Why does the Buddha ask the monk to contemplate the lotus bud?
- Does Buddha trust the monk?
- What distinguishes the master from Buddha?
- How does the monk reconcile with himself?
- Why was it the flower that showed the truth to the monk?
- What is the goal of meditation?

#### **Reflection**

- Can we see the truth?
- Is the process of becoming conscious of a brutal nature?
- Is it difficult to see our defects?
- Does knowing oneself depend on the others or on oneself?
- Why is it easier to watch a beautiful thing than an ugly one?
- Is beauty ephemeral?
- Is everything that exists ephemeral?
- Does one need to purify one’s spirit?
- Can we master our emotions?
- What distinguishes a good emotion from a bad one?

## *9/ The three seeds of mustard*

### **Is death an integral part of life?**

Long time ago, there lived a poor woman. She grew up in a small village and her family did not have much money. While was still very young, she was forced to get married, and she went to live with her husband's family in a big city, far from her home. It was difficult for her to adapt to this new life. She did not get along with her in-laws, who criticized her constantly. She was working a lot, from morning to night. She regretted her own family, her friends, as well as the farm animals. She became pregnant, and when her little boy was born, she earned some respect from her surroundings, and her life improved. Everyone loved her baby, he was so adorable. And she loved him so much! Unfortunately, her husband died shortly afterwards. She consoled herself by saying that she still has her boy. But when he was barely one year old, the child fell ill and also died.

The young woman was so saddened that she could not admit the death of her baby. She pretended that he just been weakened by fever. And she decided to find a drug that could cure him.

She asked everyone she knew if they had such a remedy, showing them her dead child, and soon she passed for crazy. All avoided him and no one knew what to tell her, no one dared to confront her with reality.

- I have to cook dinner, go ask the grocer! said a neighbor.
- I'm preparing an order, go see the doctor! replied the grocer.
- I'm sorry, but I have no remedy for your child! confessed the doctor.

Then he remembered that the Buddha was not far away.

- Why don't you go ask the Buddha, he is wise and generous!

The young woman did not know the Buddha, but desperate, she was ready to try anything.

The Buddha was sitting in the shade of a tree when the young woman came running towards him. He immediately saw her confusion.

- How can I help you, my friend?
- My child is seriously ill. I looked for a cure everywhere, but nobody could help me.

She saw the way the Buddha looked at her child, and she implored:

- Please, do not tell me he's dead! All he needs is a cure for his fever.

The Buddha pondered.

- If you want a remedy for your son, you need three mustard seeds. Go find it. Knock on doors, ask everyone, and bring them to me. But there is an important condition for the remedy: the three mustard seeds must come only from a house where nobody ever died.

- I'm going right now! she exclaimed.

At the first house, she knocked on the door. A young woman opened.

- Would you have three mustard seeds to make a cure for my child?

The girl returned with the three seeds, smiling. But the mother remembered the words of the Buddha.

- I almost forgot! Did someone die in this house?

- Oh yes! A few months ago, my grandmother, she was very old.

The face of the mother saddened and she went away.

In front of the next house sat an old man.

- What can I do for you?

- Would you have three mustard seeds to make a drug for my sick child?

Slowly, the old man got up, went into the house, and returned with the seeds.

Again, she remembered.

- Did anyone die in this house?

- Alas, my daughter passed away last year, leaving her two orphaned children.

She went from door to door, but the problem was always the same. All had lost a loved one this year or earlier. She still did not have her three mustard seeds, but she was beginning to understand.

The next day, she returned to the Buddha, who was waiting. She was not longer carrying the little bundle. Her face was now calmer.

- Have you managed to find the mustard seeds? inquired the Buddha.

- No. But now I understand that everyone loses people they love. So I laid down my baby in order for him to rest in peace. I'm always sad, but my heart is at peace. I came to thank you.

## ***Some questions to deepen and prolong***

### **Comprehension**

- Why does the life of the young woman improve when she gives birth to a child?
- Why does the young woman accept more easily the death of her husband than the death of her child?
- Why does everyone avoid the sad young woman?
- Why does the doctor send the girl to see Buddha?
- Why does the young woman ask Buddha not say her son is dead?
- Does the mother know her child is dead?
- What is the "strategy" of the Buddha toward the mother?
- Does the Buddha give hope to the young woman?
- Why does the mother forget each time the recommendation of Buddha?
- Did the young woman cease to suffer at the end of the story?

### **Reflection**

- Is the death of a child more painful than the death of an adult?
- Should we periodically think about death?
- Is death the end of everything?
- Why is it difficult to accept the death of a close person?
- Should we always accept reality?
- Can we be peaceful and sad all at once?
- Is life in itself a tragedy?
- What is most terrible, life or death?
- Can we learn to die?
- Should we accept death or fight it?



## 10/ *The five wise men*

### **Is knowledge primarily a theory or a practice?**

At the court of the king lived two animals, a dog and a goat. Each one, every day, was struggling to find his food. The dog preferred the kitchen, where he tried to steal a piece of meat here and there. Unfortunately, the cooks were chasing him as soon as they saw him. For its part, the goat would rather go to the stables where there were elephants in order to collect grass or hay. Unfortunately, the grooms greeted her with sticks.

One day, the two animals met, and each recognized how the other was in a pitiful state. They shared their mutual misery. Then the dog had an idea and offered the goat a mutual aid pact. He would get food for the goat in the stables, for no one be suspicious of him there, as she would go to the kitchen, for nobody would care about her presence. Once agreed, they went their separate ways and everything went as planned. Both fed each other.

One day, while the king was walking, he noticed this strange friendship between a dog and a goat, of which he did not understand the meaning. Then he realized their collaboration, quite unusual. Taken aback, he saw there the opportunity to test the five wise men that served him advisors. He called them and asked them to explain how these

animals had been able to establish such a community and he threatened to lose their jobs if they could not come up with a decent explanation.

The five wise men departed very worried, not knowing what to do. The youngest, still an apprentice, offered to observe the two animals, the oldest replied the proposal was obvious. There, they saw indeed that both animals lived in good friendship. But when they came closer, the dog barked and the goat showed her horns. They fled at once and remained at distance. Then the wisest proposed to check in the library for a book on animals, which seemed a much less dangerous strategy.

The young, on his side, preferred to investigate the usual habits of the king, in order to understand the origin of such an idea. He discovered that every afternoon the sovereign watched the surroundings from his terrace. The smart young man joined the terrace and realized that from there one could observe quite well the two animals. So he realized what was going on.

The wise men searched the books and found nothing there that could enlighten them. They questioned their young colleague to see if he had found something. He was willing to help, but at the same time he wanted to play a trick on them. So he wrote on a piece of paper a mysterious message that he handed to his elders. As one of them complained of not understanding anything, he replied that it was the only answer he could come up with, and for lack of a better option, he could read it to the king the next day. Still grumbling, the wise men retired.

The next morning when the king summoned them, the most learned of the wise men took an inspired air and recited the mysterious message, which he had memorized.

- Stable and kitchen, both are beaten. Living together, both satiated.

- I hope you understand, said grandly the learned sage to the king.

- Bravo, said the king, you have resolved the problem.

But the queen, who had listened, intervened to declare she understood nothing.

The learned sage was quite embarrassed. But the young apprentice explained the meaning. The most learned sage, very surprised, commented that he would not have explained things better. So the king concludes that the wise men could keep their jobs because they were quite competent.

### ***Some questions to deepen and prolong***

#### **Comprehension**

- What is surprising in the behavior of the two animals?
- Why did the king decide to test his advisors?
- Why did the king use threat toward his advisers?
- Why did the wisest of the sages propose to consult a book rather than watch the animals?
- Are the wise men truly wise?
- Why is it the youngest who proposes to rather watch the two animals?
- Why does the youngest choose to investigate the king's behavior?
- Why does the youngest decide to give a lesson to the other wise men?
- What does the queen represent in this story?
- Is the king mistaken in his final judgment?

#### **Reflection**

- Is it necessary to be friends to help each other?
- Is friendship based on utility?
- Is threat sometimes a good strategy?
- What is the use of putting someone to the test?
- Why is it difficult to understand what is simple?
- Are several forms of wisdom?
- Is knowledge always concerned with truth?
- Is knowledge an end in itself or a means?
- Does knowledge have different sources?
- Can knowledge be a form of corruption?

## 11/ None

### Why do we always want something and not nothing?

At the time when the Bodhisattva, the Awaken Being, had become a saint, he went into the Himalayan Mountains, where five hundred monks followed him and became his disciples. He had acquired supernatural powers: he was flying in the air and understood people's thoughts even when they were not expressed. His immense powers much impressed his five hundred disciples.

During the rainy season, his deputy went with two hundred and fifty monks in the surrounding villages in order to find seeds, salt and other necessities. This was happening at the time when the master was about die. The two hundred and fifty monks that remained in the temple were well aware of this. So they decided to ask him an important question.

- O Holy Man, in your long life where you have practiced compassion and meditation, what was your greatest fulfillment?

The Bodhisattva, being about to die, had great difficulty talking and he uttered only one word:

- Nothing.

Then he went to heaven.

The two hundred and fifty followers were expecting some fantastic words endowed with magical power. So they were very disappointed. They told each other:

- After a long life of practice of compassion and meditation, our poor master has accomplished "nothing"!

They came to think that he had failed his life, so they burned his body without any particular ceremony, without honor or respect.

When the deputy returned with the two hundred and fifty monks, he immediately asked:

- Where is the Holy One?

- He's dead, the other replied.

- Did you ask him for his greatest accomplishment?

- Of course, we did!

- And what did he say?

- He said he had accomplished "nothing". So we have not done any ceremony for his funeral.

The deputy, flabbergasted, restraining his anger, replied.

- My brothers, you have not understood the meaning of the master's words. He was telling you he had achieved the great knowledge of "nothing." He had realized that the names of things are not what things are. There is what there is, without being called "this thing" or "that thing." There are no "things", there is nothing.

But the more the deputy tried to explain the wonderful accomplishment of the great master, the less the monks understood. During this

time, from paradise, the Enlightened Being heard that the words of his former deputy were not accepted. So he reappeared on earth, floating in the air above his monastery. He praised the words and wisdom of his assistant, adding:

- Whoever hears the Truth and grasps it without thinking is much better than a hundred fools who spend a hundred years thinking, and thinking, and thinking. After that, he disappeared.

### ***Some questions to deepen and prolong***

#### **Comprehension**

- Why do the powers of the Bodhisattva impress the monks?
- Why The Bodhisattva replied "nothing" to the question of the monks?
- Why are they monks disappointed with the response of the master?
- Do the monks have good reasons to be disappointed?
- What do the monks expect from their master?
- Why do monks deprive the Bodhisattva of a real funeral?
- Why is the deputy angry?
- Why don't the monks understand the words of the deputy?
- Can we assume that the monks understood the words of the Buddha?
- What is the meaning of "nothing"?

#### **Reflection**

- How can we understand someone without speaking to him?
- Why is "nothing" a problem for us?
- Should we seek to accomplish something during our existence?
- Is it possible to expect nothing from others?
- Why do we want to be reassured?
- Can we think "nothing"?
- To meditate, is it to think?
- Can Truth be taught?
- Is the essence of things elusive?
- Why cannot we accept that things escape us?

## *12/ The man who was called Bad*

### **What is the reality of a name?**

There was once a famous master surrounded by many students studying the sacred writings with him. One of his disciples had been named "Bad" by his parents. He did not like his name and told himself:

- When I am told "Come Bad!", "Go ahead Bad", "Do this Bad!", it is not pretty or pleasant, either for myself or for the others: it is unsightly and it will bring me bad luck.

Thus one day, he went to see his master and he asked him to give a more pleasant name that would bring good fortune rather than bad luck. The master replied:

- Okay my son. Go where you want in the world and find a happier name. When you come back, I will officially baptize you with your new name.

So Bad left the monastery and arrived in town. A man had just died, so Bad asked people what his name was. Someone replied:

- His name was Alive.

- Alive is dead! exclaimed Bad.

The man answered:

- Be he called Alive or Dead, anyway he must die. A name is only a word we use to recognize someone, and nothing else. Only an idiot would ignore this! "

Bad continued his way and he witnessed a terrible scene. A young girl was brutally treated by a man in the street. He asked onlookers why no one intervened. They replied:

- She is enslaved for indebtedness, and will remain so until she pays back the whole sum.

- What is her name? asked Bad.

- Rich, he was told.

- Her name is Rich? And she has no money! Bad marveled.

- Be she called Rich or Poor, her name does not change anything. A name is only a word we use to recognize someone, and nothing else. Only a fool would not know that.

Puzzled, Bad was beginning to lose interest in changing his name.

Leaving the city, on the road, he met a man who seemed totally lost. He asked him what his name was.

- My name is Guide.

- You mean that even someone called Guide can be lost?

- That my nametag be Lost, stranger, or Lost, anyway I cannot find my way. A name is only a word we use to recognize someone, and nothing else. Only a fool would not know that! replied the man.

Bad, finally reconciled with his name, returned to the monastery.

The master asked;

- How are you my son? Have you found a good name?

The monk answered:

- Master, those called Alive or Dead equally die, Rich and Poor can be both without money, Lost or Guide may go astray just the same. Now I know a name is only a

word we use to recognize a person. Names are not the cause of things, only actions engender them. So I am satisfied with my name. There is no reason to change.

### ***Some questions to deepen and prolong***

#### **Comprehension**

- Why can't Bad stand his name?
- Is it his name or himself that Bad does not accept?
- Is Bad superstitious?
- Why does the master accept the request of Bad?
- Why does the master propose that Bad travels?
- Is it realistic to think that a name is "only a word we use to recognize someone"?
- Is Bad an idiot, as suggested the story?
- Why does Bad lose interest in changing his name?
- Why Name is not it "the cause of things"?
- Is Bad finally satisfied with his name, or indifferent?

#### **Reflection**

- Can name really be neutral?
- Does our name say who we are?
- Is it legitimate or not to be attached to our name?
- Are we free to determine who we are?
- Do words have power?
- Does language determine reality?
- Does bad luck exist?
- Is there in itself an objective reality?
- Should one choose his name at will?
- Why do we need so much to affirm ourself?

## *13/ Rain and shine*

### **Does our happiness depend on us?**

There was a woman who was crying all the time. She did not spend a single day without lengthily shedding tears several times. She lived alone, since her two daughters were married. The first one had espoused an umbrella salesman and the second a vendor of noodles. On sunny days the woman lamented:

- Alas! It is such a beautiful day! With this sun, who will buy umbrellas? And what will happen when the store will be closed?

And when it rained, she lamented for her second daughter.

- Alas! With this rain, with no sun, how will they dry their noodles? There will be nothing to sell. What will we do then?

Her thoughts always saddened her. And she could not help crying.

Thus the old woman lived daily in disarray. Be there rain or shine, she always found a reason to complain. Her family and friends did not know what to do with her, and in jest they were calling her "the weeper."

A monk lived not far from there. He noticed her, wondered why this woman cried all the time and one day he finally asked her the question. On hearing her explanations, the monk gently replied:

- Madam, you have no need to worry this way. If you like, I'll show you how to be happy, and you will no longer need to weep.

The lady was delighted with this proposal. She asked the monk to show her immediately what to do. He replied:

- It is very simple. You just need to change your perspective. On sunny days, do not think about your elder daughter who cannot sell umbrellas, but rather about your younger one who can dry her noodles and vend them. While on rainy days, think about your umbrella shop of your elder, which will do good business.

The face of the old woman brightened. She hastened to follow the advice of the monk and she was not seen weeping anymore. No one could recognize her. Since that time, she was known as "the smiler."

## ***Some questions to deepen and prolong***

### **Comprehension**

- Why does the woman cry so much?
- Does the woman have reasons to complain?
- Why does the woman rather see the negative side of things?
- Does the woman projects her own unhappiness on her daughters?
- Does the woman wallow in her misfortune?
- Does the woman accept the reality of the world?
- Why is the woman pleased with the proposal of the monk?
- Did the woman need the monk in order to change her perspective?
- What did the woman learn by following the monk's advice?
- What was the intention of the monk by offering advice to the woman?

### **Reflection**

- Why do we like complaining?
- Should we totally stop complaining?
- What is the main cause of unhappiness?
- Why is it difficult to be happy?
- Does our happiness depend on ourselves?
- Is it a good decision to see mainly the positive side of things?
- Can we show someone how to be happy?
- Is it possible to change our way of thinking?
- Does our vision of things determine their reality?
- What constitute the supreme wisdom?



## *14/ The man who wanted to be holy*

### **Must we suffer to realize our self?**

Long time ago, the Enlightened Being lived in a world where most religions were identical. They taught that the way to eliminate the suffering of the spirit was to make the body suffer in its place. Strange as it may seem, most people thought the holiest among the saints were those who tortured the most their body. Since all seemed to agree with this, the Bodhisattva decided to see for himself if it was true.

So he stopped living like an ordinary person and became a saint, according to the customs of the time. This means that he abandoned everything, even his clothes. He went naked, his body only covered by dust and dirt. In order not to be spoiled by the taste of good food, he forced himself to eat disgusting things gathered on the earth: ashes, urine, cow dung, etc. To better concentrate without being interrupted by anyone, he went to live in the most dangerous part of the forest. When he saw a human being, he fled like a frightened hare. During winter, he spent his days under the trees, and his nights under the open skies. So that during the day, he was soaked by the cold water flowing along the icicles hanging from the branches. And during the night, he would be covered by the falling snow. This way, he was hurting his body as much as he could. In the summer, he spent his days in the open air, in order to be burned by the sunshine. At night he would sit under the trees, in order not to be cooled by the air currents. So he could suffer as much as possible from the heat.

That is how he was fighting with himself, trying to bring peace to his mind. He was so determined that he lived his entire life in this way. But when he was about to die, he had a vision of himself living in a hellish world in his afterlife, suffering there as he suffered on earth, or more. This staggered him completely. Instantly, he knew that all these ways in which he tortured his body were completely useless, even perverse. In fact, they had never provided him with peace of the spirit. He immediately abandoned his false claims, and he knew the truth. Thus he died, and returned in a heavenly world.

## ***Some questions to deepen and prolong***

### **Comprehension**

- Why should we make our body suffer?
- Why does a person want to be holy?
- Does the Bodhisattva have confidence in himself?
- Does the Bodhisattva take pleasure in suffering?
- What are the different ways to suffer invented by the Bodhisattva?
- Did the Bodhisattva manage to bring peace to his mind?
- Is the Bodhisattva perverse?
- Why did the Bodhisattva change his attitude?
- Is the life of the Bodhisattva an absurdity?
- What determines salvation?

### **Reflection**

- What is the difference between a saint and an ordinary person?
- Should faith have limitations?
- What could be the good side of excess?
- Should we go beyond the limits of our body?
- Can inflicting pain on oneself be a form of complacency?
- Is it necessary to suffer in order to stop suffering?
- Can suffering have a meaning?
- Should we do what we want with our own body?
- Why is there a conflict between the body and the mind?
- Does Truth always need time?

## *15/ The band of drunkards*

### **Is common sense common?**

In this story, the Enlightened Being, born into a wealthy family, was the richest man of the city and adviser to the king. In the same town roved around a bunch of drunkards. They spent their time looking for expedients to obtain alcohol and get drunk. One day, as they had no more money, which often happened, they resolved to rob the richest man in town, without realizing who he was. So they decided to concoct a special drink containing a powerful sleeping potion. They established a sort of little makeshift bar along the main street leading to the palace. Thus, when their "victim" came by, one of the drunkards shouted:

- Honorable sir, why not start your day drinking a shot with us? The first drink is on the house, he added, while shedding the "special" cocktail in a cup.

Of course, the Awakened did not drink any kind of alcohol. However, he wondered why these loafers were so generous on this day. It did not resemble them; it had to be a trick. So he decided to teach them a lesson. He answered:

- It would be a serious mistake for me to appear before the king in a drunken state, or even with the smallest trace of alcohol on my breath. Also, be kind and wait for me there, I'll see you tonight when I come back from the palace.

The drunkards were disappointed not to perform their mischief. Nevertheless, for want of a better option, they decided to wait. Later on, the man passed again before the makeshift bar. The drunkards called him out at once.

- Honorable sir, why not celebrate your visit to the king? Let us offer you a shot, as promised.

The man looked at the bottle and the glass suspiciously.

- I do not trust you! This bottle is as full as this morning. If your liquor were so good, you would have already savored it yourself. I even think there would be none left. You me really take for an idiot!

And the Awakened went his way, while the band of drunkards, disappointed, returned to their sordid tricks.

## ***Some questions to deepen and prolong***

### **Comprehension**

- Why did the drunkards think they could deceive the rich man?
- Do the drunkards know why they drink?
- Why do the drunkards use such a ploy to trap the man?
- Do the drunkards think they are convincing?
- What conception of themselves do these drunkards have?
- Do the drunkards want to bring the rich man in their downfall?
- What are the main differences between the rich man and the drunkards?
- Do the drunkards use common sense?
- What is the main error the drunkards make?
- Are the drunkards doomed to be disappointed?

### **Reflection**

- Does an alcoholic always remain an alcoholic?
- Why do we develop an addiction?
- Why is an addiction a problem?
- Do addictions make us necessarily unhappy?
- Can we avoid being addicted to something?
- Is the human being always in the lack?
- Is common sense an adequate standard of judgment?
- Is common sense the most widely shared thing in the world, as Descartes wrote?
- Is detachment necessarily a virtue?
- Can dependence be beneficial or legitimate?

## 16/ *The persevering quail*

### Is perseverance always rewarded?

A quail lived in a large forest. One sad day, during a storm, lightning struck a tree not far from her, which began to burn. Soon, the flames spread to other trees. The little quail became worried. She told herself that if the fire thus continued, many animals from the forest would be killed. She concluded she had to do something urgently.

Alas, she felt good powerless! For lack of a better idea, she decided nevertheless to fly to the river, not far away, to soak herself with water and then to drip over the fire, in order to weaken the strength of the flames. Of course, she soon realized that her efforts were not very successful, because the fire was gaining more and more importance. In spite of this, she could not help continue: something within herself forced her to persevere, to keep making those repetitive round trips between the river and the fire, in order to bring back each time a few drops of water.

From heaven, the gods were watching the scene.

- What a ridiculous bird, said one of them! This miserable little quail really believes she can put out the fire by herself!

A goddess added:

- She will never make it! She should give up. Too bad for her if she burns.

But a third, rather touched, announced:

- I'm going to tell her to stop, and advise that she rather save her own life, because she will wear herself out in this enterprise. She will indeed be caught in the fire.

Thereupon, the god turned into an eagle in order to accomplish what he had said.

He long sought the quail, invisible, as the smoke was dense.

When he found her, he tried to talk to her, but she would not listen.

- I don't have time to talk to you! As you see, I'm busy.

The eagle answered:

- You will not extinguish the fire like that. Get out of this furnace! Save yourself while

you still can!

But the little quail wanted nothing to do with those warnings.

- If you want to do something useful, it is not your advice I need, but your assistance so we can extinguish this fire. Either you help me or you might as well go away.

Therefore the eagle abandoned the quail to her fate, admiring however her determination.

When they learned what had happened, the gods took counsel and finally conceded that they themselves had to help such a little being, brave and determined. So they decided to make it rain, a dense and powerful rain. Thus downpours fell upon the forest, and after a few hours the fire was finally extinguished.

The little quail was very happy, thinking that her efforts had not been in vain.

Moreover, the gods decided to reward her for her generosity, courage and

perseverance. Hence, since that time, quails have a crest on the head, which is a kind of small crown.

### ***Some questions to deepen and prolong***

#### **Comprehension**

- Does the quail think first of all to others or to herself?
- Does the quail think before acting?
- Is the quail aware of her limitations?
- Why does the quail persevere despite her failure?
- Why do the gods laugh at the quail?
- Is the quail a challenge to the gods?
- Why does the quail refuse to listen to the eagle?
- Is the opinion of the eagle shared by the quail?
- Why do the gods finally decide to help the quail?
- Does the quail deserve a reward?

#### **Reflection**

- Do we all have a mission?
- Why do we like to feel useful?
- Should we always think before acting?
- Are we responsible for others?
- It is better, as Descartes wrote, to modify our desires rather than the order of the world?
- Can excess be good?
- Is conviction a trap?
- Can we be right against everybody else?
- What is the difference between courage and recklessness?
- Does perseverance always end up being rewarded?

## *17/ The old man and the scorpion*

### **Does all that exist have a reason to be?**

Once finished his meditation, the old man opened his eyes. He noticed a scorpion desperately struggling in the water. As the animal came closer to where he was, the old man reached out his hand in order to assist the poor animal and prevent him from drowning. No sooner had he touched the scorpion that the latter stung him. Instinctively, the old man withdrew his hand. But moments later, once his spirits recovered, he repeated the same gesture and reached out again to save the scorpion. This time, the insect stung him so hard with his poisoned tail that the hand of the poor man swelled and took a violet color, while his face grimaced in pain.

At that moment, a passerby who had observed the whole scene exclaimed:

- Hey, stupid old man, what's wrong with you? Only an idiot or a madman would risk his life for such an ugly and wicked creature. Don't you know that you could get killed, trying to save that ungrateful scorpion? You must know he was going to sting you!

The old man turned his head. He looked into the eyes of the stranger and calmly replied:

- My friend, it is not because it is in the nature of the scorpion to prick that I have to change my nature, which is to help.

## ***Some questions to deepen and prolong***

### **Comprehension**

- Can the old man not save the scorpion?
- Is the advice of the passerby legitimate?
- Is the passerby selfish?
- Does the old man act for himself or for the scorpion?
- Are the old man and the scorpion alike?
- Is the old man a sage or a fool?
- Did the old man expect something from the scorpion?
- Is the nature of the scorpion senseless?
- Is it possible to help the scorpion?
- Is the old man responsible for the scorpion?

### **Reflection**

- Why do we want to save others?
- Is it good or bad to be selfish?
- Should we help someone who does not ask for help?
- Should we help someone who does not want to be helped?
- Is it in the nature of man to help others?
- Why do we hurt others?
- Are there beings that are good or bad by nature?
- Does all that exist have a purpose?
- Are we responsible for everything?
- Should we necessarily have compassion for others?



## 18/ *The cracked jar*

### Should we accept what we are?

A water carrier was accomplishing daily his heavy task, with the help of two wide jars he was carrying, suspended to a long and strong bamboo perched on his shoulders, one on each side. But the jars, although similar in size and weight, were not at all identical. One of them, more new, quite lustered, was in perfect condition, while the other, more ancient, tarnished by time, was somewhat porous. If the first fully preserved its precious load of water from the well to the village, the second lost almost half of it during the journey. This problem had lasted long enough. Unfortunately, the poor man did not earn enough money to replace the defective jar. This made his work more difficult, partly because he worked for nothing, wasting time and income, secondly because it unbalanced his burden, making transportation more difficult.

Of course, the "good" jar was proud of herself, both for its perfect appearance and because it managed to fulfill its function flawlessly. While the poor damaged jar was ashamed of its imperfection. It felt depressed because it was ugly and because it could fulfill only half of its task. Finally, tired of this constant failure, it addressed the water carrier when he was filling it up.

- I feel guilty, and I beg you to apologize.

- Why? responded the man, what are you ashamed of?

- I'm not doing what I should do. Each trip, I lose half my water, since I am old and worn out. Because of me, you make all these efforts for nothing and you are not rewarded for your work, she explained.

The water carrier was surprised, and touched by this confession. Then, full of compassion, after reflection, he replied to the jar:

- As we return home, I want you look at all the beautiful flowers there by the wayside.

As the carrier had asked, all along the way, the old jar looked and indeed saw numerous magnificent flowers drenched in the sun, that it had never noticed. It did marvel at the sight of their beauty, however, upon arrival, the jar still felt sad, because once more it had lost half the water.

So the water carrier said:

- Have you realized that there were beautiful flowers only on one side, yours, and almost none of the other side?

- Ah yes, right! answered the jar, I had not noticed.

- You see, as I knew you were losing water, I decided to take advantage of it. So I planted flower seeds on your side of the road, and each day, you have watered them, without knowing it. Thanks to you, those beautiful flowers have grown, who embellish the whole path.

## ***Some questions to deepen and prolong***

### **Comprehension**

- Should the water carrier have replaced the ancient jar?
- Is the new jar justifiably proud of itself?
- Does the water carrier keep the two jars for same reasons?
- Is the old jar right to be ashamed?
- Is the old jar ashamed relative to the man or to itself?
- Why didn't the ancient jar see the flowers?
- What do represent the flowers in the story?
- Is the old jar well endowed?
- Should the old jar accept its jar condition?
- Is the water carrier wise?

### **Reflection**

- Why do we not see the obvious?
- Should we necessarily reconcile with what we are?
- Why do we seek perfection?
- Is it a problem to seek perfection?
- Can we love imperfection?
- Are we responsible for our misfortunes?
- Can we suffer for someone else?
- Do men first of all they look for utility, like Spinoza claims?
- Is shame a legitimate feeling?
- Why are we locked inside ourselves?

## 19/ *The straw*

### Can we trust others?

A monk lived in a village, which called himself an ascetic. But he rather profited from the villagers and their alms. He was ascetic only by name. As for meditation, it was reserved for appearance, when people came to consult him. In fact, he did not perceive any interest in it, moreover he found the meditation position quite uncomfortable.

A notable visited him one day asking for his blessing and help. The monk gave his blessing and asked about the nature of the request. The man explained he had a bag of gold coins, he was afraid that thieves would come and steal it, but he thought that under the protection of the holy man the treasure would be safe, since no one would look for money in the house of an ascetic.

- Of course, answered the monk, I'd be happy to oblige.

So he took the money. But he already had calculated what to do with this "gift" by fleeing the village.

- Go in peace, he told the notable.

However, he thought to wait for a few days, in order to avoid arousing suspicion. Meanwhile, he buried the bag inside a hole at the foot of a tree.

A few days later, preparing for his departure, he went to see the notable and explained that he was leaving on a trip. Then, thinking himself very clever, he devised a stratagem so the notable would keep trusting him and not suspect any theft. He left the house, went to the fields, pick up a piece of straw, put it in his hair and returned to his victim. The man was astonished by the return of monk, who explained:

- I found a straw in my hair, I told myself that it must have fallen from your roof last time I came. So I bring it back, for the mere idea that I took something from you is unbearable to me. I do not want to take anything from others that they have not voluntarily given to me.

The notable exclaimed, admiring the sanctity of this monk. But his young son who had observed the scene did not draw the same conclusion. He told his father:

- Father, those who are truly saints do not make any case of such a small thing. I think they are humble and discreet, when this man seems to me very excessive. Let's go check what he is up to, because his whole story is rather weird.

After some hesitation, however worried and shaken by the arguments of his son, the father agreed to follow. They went surreptitiously in search of the monk. They saw him pulling the money out of the hole at the foot of the tree, put it in his bag and leave with his walking stick.

- You see, said the son to the father, he is taking off with your money!

The father was furious, he ran after the monk, caught him by the robe, and started to shout:

- You thief, he said, and liar! You make a big deal for a wisp of straw, but you steal my money. Give my money back, leave this village and never come back.

Once he calmed down, he commented:

- You see my son, we must always beware of those who exhibit their holiness!  
The son nodded and acquiesced.

### ***Some questions to deepen and prolong***

#### **Comprehension**

- Why does the monk pretend to be what he is not?
- Is the monk a true monk?
- Why is the notable afraid that thieves take his money?
- Is the monk smart?
- Why did the notable believe the monk?
- Why did the son of the notable not believe the monk?
- Why was the notable shaken by arguments of his son?
- Why is the monk so excessive?
- What does the monk pursue?
- In what ways are the notable and the monk alike?

#### **Reflection**

- Why do we try to impress others?
- Is our own image our idol?
- How can we decide if what we hear is true or false?
- Do we love people for what they are or for what they claim to be?
- Can we trust appearances?
- Can we lie to ourselves?
- Do we need to believe in our own inventions?
- Is it necessary to exploit others in order to satisfy our own desires?
- Should we respect the self-image that people fabricate themselves?
- Is social identity a mere issue of image?

## 20/ Impermanence

### Is the essential urgent?

An important man in town, renowned as a sage, came one day ask some advice from a famous master.

- What to do to be happy?

The master said:

- Simply recite the Buddha's name several times a day.

The other replied:

- Indeed! I will do it as soon as possible. But there are already three important things I have to do and I have no time for it. First, my father just died and I have to take care of his funeral. Then my son still has not found a career and I have to find him a position. Finally, my daughter is still single, I should look for a husband. Let me address these three issues, and as soon as this is over I will follow your advice, because I am sure that you are right.

A few weeks later, this important man was struck by a serious illness and died quickly. The master was invited to the ceremony where he was asked to say a few words of condolence:

- This important and respectful man asked me for advice. I recommended him to recite the name of the Blessed. He gave me three objections with three important obligations he had not yet honored. But unfortunately, impermanence has readily taken him away. Oh existence, you treat us so badly! Listening to these eulogies today, who among

us would dare to say that this important man was not wise? However, those determined to escape suffering and to accomplish themselves should take advantage of every little moment for reciting the Lord's name at this very instant, without waiting, whatever the reason, however legitimate and urgent it might be. They will thus avoid walking the unfortunate footsteps of those who have erred before them, preparing to regret their decisions for thousands of autumns to come.

## ***Some questions to deepen and prolong***

### **Comprehension**

- Why did the important and wise man consult a famous master?
- Why does the master advise the man to "recite the name of Buddha several times a day"?
- Why does not the man follow the master's advice?
- Does the important man know what he wants?
- Why does the important man prefer obligations to happiness?
- Does the important man think he is eternal?
- Does the important man think the teacher is right?
- Why does the master say "Oh existence, you treat us so badly!"?
- Why does the master say the important man was wise?
- What means the idea of "taking advantage of every little moment"?

### **Reflection**

- Is the human being contradictory?
- Is perfect happiness possible?
- Should we find happiness?
- Why do we encumber ourselves with various obligations?
- Are obligations in reality choices?
- Do we experience difficulty thinking the finitude of our own existence?
- Do we use others to avoid ourselves?
- Why do forget that we die?
- Is life a permanent negation of death?
- Is it difficult to take advantage of the present moment?