

## New clothes and nakedness<sup>1</sup>

“The Emperor’s New Clothes” (Danish, *Kejserens nye Klæder*) is a short fairy tale by Danish fairy-tale writer and poet Hans Christian Andersen (1805-1875) about two swindling weavers who dupe a vain and witless emperor into believing that his new suit of royal robes is actually invisible to those unfit for their positions, stupid, or inept.

The two weavers “professionally” go about their task of making the invisible robes, almost like a careful religious ritual. When the robes are ready, they even have the emperor try “them” on. With some subtle coaching, the emperor and his court, “see” how refined and subtle the new robes are. The emperor is excited to show off his vanity to all his subjects.

When the emperor proudly and publicly parades before his subjects in his “new clothes,” everyone praises them – except for a child, who cries out, “But he isn’t wearing anything at all!”<sup>2</sup> We are not told of the emperor’s reaction; so this is left to our imagination and creativity. Surely, the embarrassment must have been dire, by which time the two swindling weavers have absconded with their dishonest wealth.

Here we can see the emperor as our own vain self-centredness (a quality, not a stereotype), seeking others’ attention and approval, and wasting our time in frivolities. The two swindling weavers are our own ignorance and craving: without a direct knowledge of true reality we seek meaning and happiness in external things. The fawning courtiers and subjects are those who are “nice” people who do not really care about us.

This is the mark of a false friend, says **the Sigāl’ovāda Sutta** (D 31), the “sweet-talker” (*anuppiya, bhāṇī*), who “approves of our doing wrong; approves of our doing right.”<sup>3</sup> The reality is that they only have their own self-interest at heart, and this actually harms us and others in the end.

On a deeper level, the tale of the emperor’s new clothes is closely related to one of the most quoted religious stories – that of **the blind men and the elephant** (Udāna 6.4).<sup>4</sup> This famous Indian and Buddhist parable is quoted in some form in the writings of all the world’s religions, and even figured in quantum physics<sup>5</sup> and poetry.<sup>6</sup>

The parable essentially instructs us, in our thinking, not to take a part for the whole. In other words, we should see the bigger picture, whether it is our opinion of others or view of religion – or even our own view of ourselves. If we see only our negative qualities, we would think we are failures. If we look only at what we like about ourselves, we are deluded into believing that we are more than what we really are. Like it or not, we are all changing, we can change, and we must be ready for such changes with love and wisdom.

Similarly, if we measure others by how they look, by their titles, or by how well they treat us, then we will only disappoint ourselves in due course. It is said that once a devout but

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<sup>1</sup> Based on **Nanā Titthiyā Sutta** (U 6.4) = SD 40a.14.

<sup>2</sup> Andersen’s tale (in *Fairy Tales Told for Children, Third Collection*, 1837).

<sup>3</sup> D 31.18/3:186 = SD 4.1: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/4.1-Sigalovada-S-d31-piya.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> **Nanā Titthiyā Sutta** (U 6.4/66-69) = SD 40a.14.

<sup>5</sup> In connection with the polyclonal B cell response (eg Michael M Lederman & Leonid Margolis, “The lymph node in HIV pathogenesis,” *Seminars in Immunology* 20,3 June 2008:187-195) & wave-particle duality (eg David Bohm, *Quantum Theory*, 1951:26).

<sup>6</sup> See Martin Gardner (1 Sep 1995). *Famous Poems from Bygone Day*: [http://books.google.com.sg/books?id=ITRorcYPLH0C&pg=PA124&redir\\_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false](http://books.google.com.sg/books?id=ITRorcYPLH0C&pg=PA124&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false). Courier Dover Publications. 1995:124.

poor follower of a rich modern Japanese Buddhist cult, tried very hard to meet its President.

After some failed attempts, he finally found the well-dressed busy President coming out of a New York hotel. He rushed up to him, but he simply ignored the devotee and slipped into his chauffeured limousine. The follower was so disappointed that he gave up the cult, and started his own study centre focussing on Buddhism, which works in finding the faults in Buddhism, and using them to try to convert Buddhists to his new-found faith.

We could say here that we tend to judge people by their clothes or robes, whether it is business, politics, a social affair, or even religion. Those who think that clothes make the man or the woman, are only worshipping externalities. Even if a rotting dead fish is wrapped in sweet grass, the stink is still evident, and the grass would stink, too.<sup>7</sup>

Often we love people, especially religious teachers, who are nice and attentive to us. We might even think they must be enlightened to be so wonderful to us. Isn't it better to know the Dharma for ourselves, and with it, connect with the goodness in others, whether they are nice to us or not?

If we are drawn to others by their externalities, we are like those who "admire" the emperor's new clothes. It is a matter of time, if we are fortunate enough, to see our own nakedness in the Dharma mirror. We are truly and comfortably clothed when we look within at our inner stillness and heart's clarity. Love dresses simply; wisdom beautifies such simple clothing.

On the brighter side of things, in time, when we mature and stand in wisdom, we should in some way reach out to such clothes-worshippers with joy and vision so that they are more sure of themselves and relate to others in more authentic ways. Whether they deserve such help or not, is not the point: this is what compassion is about.

It takes a child to point out the elephant in the room (an obvious fact or the real problem that most of us choose to deny). The child could not help exclaiming the simple truth – that the emperor has nothing on. Here, the child represents our truthfulness and moral courage. The child is also one less socially and religiously conditioned than an adult, and as such is more likely to speak the simple truth.

There is a story of how once a young novice tells the great saint Sāriputta that his lower robe is uneven. The great saint thanks the novice, good-heartedly, saying, "Thank you, teacher!" and discreetly rearranged it so that he looks proper.<sup>8</sup> The early monastic robes are very simple, and those wearing them are even simpler in their joys, but great in their wisdom. A great painting is beautiful and precious despite its frame.

The English poet, William Wordsworth, in his poem "The Rainbow" (1802) writes "The Child is the father of the Man."<sup>9</sup> The child is our innocence, truthfulness and ability to learn. Let our child teach and tame us. The Dharma makes children of us: we must learn to see and accept ourselves in the simplest and starkest of realities, and go from there.

The young boy is like the child Siddhattha, born into this world to point out the "new clothes" we keep wearing and buying, but which, in our lack of transparency, do not hide our nakedness at all. In our opaqueness to true reality, we stand naked before the knowing, and before others who exploit us. The child in the fairy tale is a reminder we need to return to a child-like ability and willingness to see the simple truths that are before us,

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<sup>7</sup> See **Sukha Patthāna Sutta** (It 3.3.7/68) = SD 82.9

<sup>8</sup> In the *Samyutta* and the *Thera, gāthā* Commentaries: SA 1:123; ThaA 3:103. See Piya Tan, *Disciples of the Buddha*, 2004:5.24c: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/books-by-piya-tan>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.bartleby.com/101/532.html>.

before the walls of words and weight of thoughts hide them from us and hinder wisdom.  
Let us be reminded of this beautiful truth whenever we see a child in old clothes.

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