

## **What's that?**

The most beautiful stories are often the simplest, taking only a few minutes to be told. The words are remarkably simple, but the story they speak brings inspiring bliss, even joyful tears, and we remember that story with joy forever. Our life is all the richer. Now we must tell it to others, to the world so that we all might be truly happy. It's easier to be good and do good when we are happy.

Once an old man sits with his grown up son on a bench outside their house. The day is sunny and clear. The son is reading a newspaper, and ignoring his father. The father looks emptily into the bright garden before him.

Then, a sparrow flies into a nearby bush. "What's that?" asks the old man instinctively.

"A sparrow!" replies the young man nonchalantly, without looking up.

The old man just sits quietly. Then, the sparrow flies up into the tree under which they are sitting. The old man looks up, and asks the son again, "What's that?"

"A sparrow!" the young man says a little louder, looking a bit annoyed now.

The old man continues to sit quietly as before. Then, the sparrow flies onto the green grass before them, happily pecking at seeds and bugs on the ground.

"What's that?" asks the father a third time.

This annoys the young man greatly. He puts down his papers, looks at his father, and shouts, "It's a sparrow, dad! S-p-a-r-r-o-w!"

His old father quietly gets up, and slowly walks back into the house. The young man looks at him, and then feels somewhat sorry for being so rude to his father.

After a few minutes, the father slowly returns with a small book. He sits down again beside his son. He opens the book, and passes it on to his son, pointing to a page.

"Read it to me, son, loudly," he tells his son.

The son reads: "Today, my youngest son, who, a few days ago turned 3, was sitting with me at the park, when a sparrow sat in front of us. My son asked me 21 times what it was, and I answered every single time that it was a sparrow. I hugged him every single time he asked the same question again and again, without getting mad, feeling affection for my innocent little boy."

Suddenly, his son remembers, and how kind and patient his father had been. And just now, how his father asked him only thrice, to remind him of that beautiful moment. He was not paying attention, and ignored the gentle echoes of love.

He gently hugs his father and kisses him on the head for his kindness.

## REFLECTION

Like the old father, the Buddha keeps asking us,

"What you are thinking? What's that you're saying? What's that you're doing?"<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See eg **Ambaṭṭha Sutta** (D 3,1.9), [SD 21.3](#). See also **Nānā Tittiya Sutta 1** (U 6.4), [SD 40a.14](#).

But we ignore the Buddha, and go on being caught up with our views, talking about our views, acting out our views. Not only that, we start changing what the Buddha has taught us. We put words into the Buddha's mouth, and simply ignore his ancient teachings. We twist his teachings, and declare how great they are!

The Buddha is asking us, "What's that...? What's that...? What's that...?" He is reminding us of those early days when we were younger and looking for answers to what the Dharma is about, "What's that?" we ask again and again.

The Buddha answers us again and again, without fail, in his simple early suttas. "This is the Dharma..." "This is the teaching..." Each and every time we ask, the Buddha answers us each and every time, with great compassion and wisdom. The answers are all there clear and simple in the suttas.

Now that we have known some teachings, we think we know better. We start talking back to the Buddha, to the Dharma, and to the Sangha of saints. We claim that the arhats are not really enlightened, that they need to become Buddhas, even though the Buddha never teaches this.

"What's that?" the Buddha asks us again and again. "Do not misrepresent me,"<sup>2</sup> the Buddha gently pleads.

Perhaps, one day, we will hear and heed the Buddha's voice, clear and simple. Then, without talking back to the Buddha, we will bow humbly and happily before him. Then, we truly understand the meaning of emptiness, that is, being empty of all views, but our hearts full of compassion and wisdom.

Meantime, let us watch the movie version of this beautiful story we have just read. Let us try to hear the Buddha's voice during the silent moments in that movie.

This is a Movie Teller Films short film entitled "What is that?" directed by Constantin Pilavios and acted by Nikos Zoioopolous and Panagiotis Mpougiouris, 2007:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UVtm\\_fgGSng](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UVtm_fgGSng)

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<sup>2</sup> See eg **Alagaddûpama Sutta** (M 22,3.4), [SD 3.13](#). See also **Neyy'attha Nî't'atthaSutta** (A 2.3.5/-1:60), [SD 2.6b](#).