

New lamps for old?

Aladdin is one of the best loved fairy tales from “the Book of the 1001 Nights” or “Arabian Nights.” Yet, it was not originally part of the collection, but was added to it by a French translator, Antoine Galland, in 1710. Galland himself heard it from an Arab story teller, a Maronite Christian, from Aleppo (Syria’s largest city). Aladdin (Ala-ud-din, “nobility of the faith”) himself is clearly Chinese, and “China,” probably ancient Turkestan. (In Pali, Aladdin would be “Ariya,” or in Sanskrit, “Arya,” meaning “noble.”)

In essence, the story goes like this. Aladdin is a playful intelligent boy living with his mother, as his father is dead. An evil magician, pretending to be the brother of his late father, recruits Aladdin to retrieve an old magic oil-lamp from a deep dangerous underground cave.

The magician asks Aladdin to hand over the lamp before pulling him out of the cave. Aladdin intuitively asks to be pulled out first. The angry magician then seals Aladdin in the underground cave and leaves. Aladdin, in his despair, rubs his hand, and unwittingly invokes the genie of the ring (which the magician has earlier lent him). The genie serves the one who wears the ring, and as commanded by Aladdin, transports him out of the cave.

Back home, Aladdin’s mother cleans the old lamp, and the lamp genie appears. Aladdin, in his turn, wishes to be fabulously rich and his wish is granted. In due course, Aladdin marries the princess of the land, Badrul-budur (“full moon of full moons”), and they live in a magical palace that is even grander than the emperor’s. The wicked magician, learning of this, tricks the princess into giving him Aladdin’s old magic lamp for a shiny new lamp, but a useless one.

The magician commands the genie to transport Aladdin’s palace, princess and all, to Maghreb in north Africa, the magician’s home. Aladdin, with the help of the ring genie, goes to Maghreb and kills the evil magician. Aladdin’s palace is returned to its original place.

The dead magician’s brother, even more powerful and evil, seeks to kill Aladdin in revenge. Disguising himself as a woman with special healing powers, she is invited into the palace by the princess. Fortunately, the lamp genie warns Aladdin of this, and Aladdin kills the second evil magician, too. Aladdin, his wife the princess, and his mother all live happily ever after.

Aladdin’s story, like any good story, has universally good values, and above all, common sense. Aladdin, of course, is ourselves, unawakened but capable of self-awakening. The evil magician is a *guru* or false teacher, who claims to have our personal interests at heart but the reality is more sinister. Or, better, the magician represents a false *teaching* that promises us blessings, empowerment, even salvation, without our having to do anything, except surrender our heart, mind and body over.

The lamp and its genie are our intellect, our “head.” If we rely only on our head, we are likely to drawn to bigger heads, and lose our minds. This is like using science, religion or learning to endorse our mindsets and hang-ups. There is always a guru out there who will happily stroke us with what we want to believe, but we never realize the hidden costs until it is too late.

The ring and its genie represent the Buddha’s simple but effective teaching, which always comes to our aid when we exert hands-on effort. We might lose the mighty lamp (because it is “out there”), but the ring is always with us, ready to work for us. Now there is the ring of truth.

Aladdin’s mother represents *compassion*. She dutifully cleans the lamp but, lacking wisdom, is terrified and confused when the lamp genie appears. Aladdin knows just what to do and benefits everyone by getting the genie to do his biddings.

The princess is our *wisdom*, which, without compassion, thinks only of personal profit and vanity (a new lamp for an old one). So the princess gives away the old magic lamp for a shiny, new one, but which is useless. Again, she unwittingly lets in an even more evil magician into their home! Fortunately, Aladdin learns from his past and destroys all the evils in his path, and so lives liberated at home with wisdom and compassion.

Moral of story? Do not trust gurus or magicians, no matter how clever or powerful they are. So there is no need to kill magicians. The greatest magician is our *mind*. There is really no magic lamp, no genie, out there: they are in our *heart*. There is no magic ring on the finger: the magic ring of truth is *self-effort* in keeping to the simple true teaching of *self-awakening*.

There is more to a good story than what we read or hear: if we listen deeply with our heart, we will hear even more. You have to find out the rest for yourself: just look within. Meanwhile, keep the humble old lamp burning bright. Never change it for anything in the world!

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