

The hanging man

A man wandering in the forest is chased by a tiger. Running for his life, he finds himself at the edge of a cliff. He sees a strong vine, and holding on to it, climbs down, while the tiger paces up and down menacingly above him. Far below him, he sees mud and river water, where a hungry crocodile is waiting for him. So he remains hanging for his life halfway up the cliff (or is that halfway down it?). The warm sun shines on him, and the gentle wind kisses him.

Then he hears some scrapping sounds above him. Two mice, one black, the other white, are gnawing at the vine holding him. Some honey has trickled onto the vine, and the mice are feasting on it. The man gingerly climbs back up to the honey-comb, chasing the mice away, and feasts on the honey. Having sweetly feasted and feeling strengthened, he then sees a cave hidden behind the rocks and undergrowth. He climbs into it and rests.¹

This story sounds familiar. Almost every Asian and a growing number of non-Asians have probably heard it. The original story is much shorter, and must have come from some ancient Chinese Buddhist classic, which in turn based it on **the Āsīvisōpama Sutta** (S 35.238), the Discourse on the Parable of the Serpents, which is a simpler parable on the 4 elements, the 5 aggregates and liberation, which we will return to in a moment.²

It is said that ancient Indian kings would rear various kinds of venomous serpents in the moats surrounding their cities. Anyone, especially enemies, who tried to infiltrate into their realms would be mortally stung. These kinds of serpents are mentioned in **the Āsīvisa Sutta** (A 4.110).³ According to the Sutta's commentary, the most venomous of them are the "wooden-mouthed" serpents, of which, says the Puggala Paññatti, there are four kinds, as follows:

- (1) one whose venom is fast-acting but not strong,
- (2) one whose venom is strong but not fast-acting,
- (3) one whose venom is fast-acting and strong, and
- (4) one whose venom is neither fast-acting nor strong.

These 4 respectively illustrates 4 kinds of persons, that is,

- (1) one who is easily angered but his anger abates quickly,
- (2) one who does not anger easily but whose anger lasts long,
- (3) one easily angered and whose anger lasts long, and
- (4) one who neither angers easily nor does his anger last long. (Pug 4.14)

Now let us return to **the Āsīvisōpama Sutta** (S 35.238), the Discourse on the Parable of the Serpents, which can be summarized as follows.

A man is warned of *four serpents of fierce fire and deadly venom*, so he flees from them. Then he is warned of *five murderous enemies* pursuing him, and again he flees. He is now warned about *a sixth murderer*, an intimate friend in disguise, seeking to kill him. He flees again and comes to *an empty village*, where he is warned that *bandits* will be attacking at that very moment. Fleeing, he comes to *a great stretch of water* with no means of crossing over. While on *the near shore*, fraught with dangers, he fashions *a makeshift raft*, and *paddling with all four limbs*, he crosses over the waters to the safety of *the far shore*.

¹ This parable has been slightly modified and expanded by me.

² S 35.238 = SD 28.1: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/28.1-Asivisopama-S-s35.238-piya1.pdf>

³ A 4.110; Pug 4.14.

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All this is, of course, figurative language, that is, whose meaning has to be teased out or interpreted. In fact, the Buddha does just this: he explains the meaning of the parable himself, as follows:

The 4 serpents of fierce and deadly venom	the 4 primary elements: ⁴ the wooden-mouth serpent = the earth element the putrid-mouth serpent = the water element the fiery-mouth serpent = the fire element the dagger-mouth serpent = the wind element
The 5 murderers	the 5 aggregates of clinging (form, feeling, perception, formations, consciousness)
The sixth murderer	delight-and-lust (insatiable desire or craving)
The empty village	the 6 internal faculties
The village-attacking dacoits	the 6 external sense-objects
A great stretch of water	the 4 mental floods (that drown us with suffering): sense-desire, (desire for) existence, views, ignorance.
The near shore	self-identity (taking the aggregates to be self or soul).
A makeshift raft	the noble eightfold path (the middle way to liberation)
Paddling with all 4 limbs	the exertion of effort (self-liberation is only so possible)
Crosses over to the far shore	becomes an arhat or fully self-awakened one

This is something we should reflect on so that we understand how they apply to our lives, and what we need to do about it.

Now, let us return the new parable presented at the start of this reflection. The man is, of course, Everyman, each and everyone of us. The tiger is the eternalist view (belief in some kind of eternal soul, supreme being, or eternal happiness or suffering), while the crocodile is the annihilationist view (the belief that this is our only life, an amoral one at that). The cliff is our human life and its unsurmountable vicissitudes. Furthermore, the cliff is earth, the sun is fire, there is water below the man, and the wind blows on him. The 4 primary elements all around us also constitute us. We are these elements; we literally come and go with these elements.

The vine is our human spirit or the divinity within: it is our potential for creativity and goodness, truth and beauty -- the middle way out of suffering. The honey represents worldly happiness, and the honeycomb, divine happiness. As for the mice, the *white* one is day, the *black* one night; together they represent *time* and *change* devouring us. In such a predicament, the best thing we can do is to feed on the sweet honey, which is right there before us, giving the strength we need. If we do the right thing, the next right thing is likely to follow. The man finds a cave which represents nirvana, true and meaningful happiness. (The cave actually leads into another part of the forest, so that he safely goes his way, as he wishes.)

On a simpler level, this is a reflection on seizing the moment (*carpe diem*), famously found in Horace's poem (originally in Latin):

Don't ask -- it's forbidden to know -- what end the gods have granted me or you,
Leuconoe.
Don't play with Babylonian fortune-telling either.
Much better it is to endure whatever will be!
Whether Jupiter has allotted you many more winters or this final one
which even now wears out the Tyrrhenian sea on the opposing rocks

⁴ See *Rūpa*, SD 17.2a (2): <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/17.2a-Khandha-1-Rupa-piya.pdf>

— be wise, be truthful, strain the wine, and shorten your long hopes.
Even as we speak, envious time will have already fled:
seize the day, trusting as little as possible in tomorrow.⁵

In short, we only truly live the moment when we see good in it and make good of it.

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⁵ Ode I-XI: Carpe Diem by Quintus Horatius Flaccus (better known as Horace).