

Ali Baba and Buddhism

Almost everyone has heard of the story of Ali Baba. Briefly, the story is like this. Ali is a poor woodcutter, who one day chances to hear a band of 40 thieves say, “Open, Sesame!” to enter their magical treasure cave, and then say, “Close, Sesame!” to seal it. When the thieves are gone, Ali uses these same words to open the cave to see a mountain of fabulous wealth.

Ali takes only a bag of gold, and closes the cave door correctly. With that wealth, he lives more comfortably than before. When his greedy and foolish rich brother, Kassim, learns of this, he forces Ali to tell him about the secret cave, which Ali does. Kassim enters the cave and tries to take as much wealth as he can. But in his excitement, he forgets the magical words and is unable to leave. The thieves return, and finding Kassim, kills him. This is only the first part of the story, but it is sufficient for the purposes of our reflection.

Significance

Most Buddhists would know “Open, Sesame!” and “Close, Sesame!” as mantras. The modern computer-savvy would at once retort: “Voice-activated command!” Interestingly, both share the idea that these words must be properly articulated for the cave-door to open, or for the computer to respond correctly. This is a technical usage of words, where words have fixed meanings and fixed usages.

Strictly speaking, technical terms are rare in the early Buddhist texts (EBTs). These texts record the Buddha essentially as describing his awakening to his disciples and audience. To the spiritually mature, he uses more difficult words and language; to the layman and masses, he usually uses simple language and lots of imageries and stories.

Take the word dhamma or its English form Dharma (found in our larger dictionaries), the most important word in early Buddhism, for example, has over a dozen meanings and usages. It can mean "truth, thought, teaching, rule, tradition, theory, state, nature, principle" and so on. It is roughly equivalent to the broad and figurative senses of the English word, “thing.” In short, the important words in the EBTs should, as a rule, be read in their proper contexts.

Misuse of language

India – ancient and modern – is a land of tongue-twisting and mind-bending gurus. From this mud and swamp of religiosity, the Buddha is the lotus in the sunshine of liberating wisdom. The Buddha may be said to be a spiritual rebel from the start. He rejects the power to rule over a warrior nation to become just its opposite, a world-renunciant and a world teacher. He speaks against the class system and the dominant religions of his day, which are the roots of Indian culture and social control.

Understandably, the mind-controllers of society invented language and stories to reject the Buddha. Rejected by most of Indian society, the Buddha becomes a world teacher in the best sense of the world, and is today influencing all the major world religions. The power of the Buddha Dharma, however, persists in the mind of the Indians.

Worse than being rejected by Indian society, the Buddha's teachings are often used by cult gurus. Even though unawakened, they call themselves "Bhagavā," meaning "Lord," reserved for holy beings like the Buddha. They thief and twist the Buddha's words for their own benefit. The gurus are attractive because they seem to evoke power in exchange for our body and mind. That's not much of an exchange!

Those of us who do survive the clutches of the gurus are like war heroes, many of whom perhaps still suffer from war trauma. The pains of the abuse and dehumanization we suffer under the gurus often still lurk in the shadows of our consciousness unless we consciously heal ourselves.

One of the signs that still trouble us may be some words used in Buddhist translations today which bring back some really painful memories. Many of these are good words like Dharma, karma, and spirituality. This is where the Ali Baba episode may help to heal us. Notice that Ali is a kind and generous man, and is not blinded by power or wealth. The only wrong he has done is to "steal" from the thieves, and he only takes what he needs without arousing their suspicion.

Kassim, his foolish rich brother, is greedy and, in the cave, tries to take more than what he needs despite his own wealth. Because of greed, he forgets the mantra or code, and dies for it. This is the fate for those with a weak or negative mind: they perish on account of the guru. The mantra is like the Buddha Word – Ali remembers it, and he is not greedy (he uses the Dharma rightly), so he is safe.

Kassim, on the other hand, forgets the mantra on account of his greed and other negative emotions. The mantra, to him, is like the guru's twisted words. He forgets the guru's teaching, and the gurus (the thieves) punish him.

Words are how we use them

So far, this story works to help us understand our nature, but only up to a point. The main weakness of this approach is that the use of "Open, Sesame!" and "Close, Sesame!" show that we have externalized the goodness and wisdom within us.

However, if the Ali Baba tale were a space-fiction story, then we may have a voice-activated door. It is locked and we need to open it. A clever engineer or technician will find some way of opening the door by bypassing the voice-activation circuits, or simply blast the lock with a laser-gun.

Instead of being troubled by the voice-activation code, we simply think of other ways of opening the door. Of course, we have another problem with the story: a clever person may ask: Why don't we avoid the code or mantra altogether? This is, of course, possible. Which brings us to another level of understanding. On a meditative level, the words don't really matter. If we have learned to calm our minds, we will feel the inner peace and realize liberating wisdom. We need to see the helpful sides of the story and language.

On a more realistic level, WORDS ARE HOW WE USE THEM, even though the gurus and others may have hijacked them. Of course, a negative word like "sin," which was invented by a certain religion, and has no other good sense, should clearly not be used but be forgotten.

We should not be controlled by words: we need to de-condition ourselves from their spell by using a counter-spell. This is by way of reminding ourselves of the original and good meaning of the words. Remember: Words are how we use them, and we can make them good.

These words are like our beloved relatives and friends. They have been given bad names by some gurus or abused by them, and made “dirty.” In the movie "The Kite Runner," based on Khaled Hosseini's book, the anti-hero Amir, towards the end, adopts the abused and shamed son of his late servant as his own kin.

We need to show compassion to these words, too. Compassion is kindness shown even when it seems that others do not deserve it. We love them with mettā –unconditional love. Then, these words will bring us inner peace and nearer the path of awakening. Free the words, and words will free us.

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[an occasional re-look at the Buddha’s Example and Teachings]

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