

How fire became light

A modern Buddhist parable based on a Sufi story
[Previously published as fb210414 Piya Tan]

Light the teacher

Once, a wise man was contemplating how all things work. He discovered, through his concentration and wisdom, how fire is made, and how fire becomes light. He learned that fire burns, but light frees us.

When people asked him who he was, he simply replied that he was called Deep (in an Indian language). To those who listened carefully, he said that his name meant “island,” that everyone should be an island that stands above the floods of the world.

Most people, however, were so excited by his handsome looks and resonant voice, that they did not really hear what he had said. Others thought that his name Deep meant “lamp,” since he taught about light.

Travelling light

The light travelled around from village to village, from town to town. However, he always stayed in the cool and quiet forest. Villages and towns were crowded and noisy. The forests were cool and peaceful, and very good places for teaching, learning and concentrating.

He taught about the light to anyone who would listen and passed his secrets to them. Many people learned how to see in the light and to be truly happy. Others just took advantage of his knowledge. Many refused to listen, even before they had time to understand how valuable his discovery could be to them.

Light spent the rest of his life teaching about fire, how to turn it into light, and how to see all things rightly so that people can walk the path of freedom. He was teaching even to the last day of his life. Many of his true disciples kept teaching what he taught. But as the centuries passed, the villages grew into towns, the towns into cities.

The tribes

Light’s disciples, like him, lived only in the cool and quiet forests. Centuries passed. However, there were those who only remembered some of the light’s teachings, and each formed their own Tribes. They each claimed that their Light (with the Big L) is the real one.

The first Tribe, living in the cities, kept the Light’s teachings to themselves, teaching the secrets to only their family members, so that they became rich and powerful. They even claimed that their family lineages went back to Light himself. So they were the true descendants of Light.

The second Tribe forgot what the light was really about, and worshipped the fire itself, and the instruments for making fire. They wrote profound books about fire, giving it an initial

capital Fire. They taught others about how to use the instruments to make fire. People who heard them were amazed: they believed and followed them. This Fire Tribe lived in big temples and were well connected everywhere.

The third Tribe studied the fire so that they learned how to use it. They kept themselves warm, cooked their meals, burned their refuse; and even kept away their enemies. In short, it made them powerful. They even made fire-weapons, sold them, and became very wealthy from it.

The fourth Tribe worshipped the image of Light himself: which was, of course, Fire. After all, it was he who taught them about making Fire in their legends. Some believed in the legends, some did not. Some changed the stories so that they are more believable. Others changed the stories to fit their culture and countries better. Some even claimed Fire had arisen again in their own Tribe, and this was the True Fire.

The fifth Tribe was the cleverest of them all. They claimed they still know the Fire, that there are many kinds of Fire, like wood fire, bush fire, oil fire, gas fire, metal fire, electric fire. They taught that Fire lived in these materials themselves and was omnipresent, even before the beginning of the universe. In short, the Fire is in every one of us: we only need to light it up. But only they knew how to do this: we must learn the mantra, the magic words from them.

The disciples

Many years passed, and a small band of the light's forest disciples travelled through the lands of these Tribes. They were shocked at how all these Tribes had only understood a bit of the light's teachings and misused them.

They thought, "All these teachings and practices are only about fire, and how to make it. They are only knowledge and rituals. They know nothing about the light and how to see true reality. Let us bring them back to the path of freedom!"

The 1st tribe

When they visited the First Tribe, the band was well received. The Light priests invited the travellers to join their rituals of making fire. When it was over, the whole Tribe was excited. The Tribe Leader asked if the travellers had anything to tell them.

One of the travelling elders then said:

"The light taught us how to put out fire. Only then, we see the light!"

The Tribe gasped in a single voice, shocked at such blasphemy. Because of the crowd's reaction, the travellers had to leave and move on.

The 2nd tribe

The travellers went to the next Tribe, the one worshipping the instruments of fire-making. Another elder disciple spoke to them:

“You are only worshipping the means of making fire. It is not even the light.”

The Tribe Leader spoke with great kindness to the elder:

“You are welcome as travellers and strangers in our midst. But as strangers, foreign to our history and customs, you cannot understand what we are doing. People will think that you are trying to take our culture away. We therefore cannot listen to you!”

The travellers simply had to move on.

The 3rd tribe

In the land of the 3rd Tribe, the travellers found that in every house, there was an idol of the Light, which the dwellers claimed was an image of the original Light. A third elder spoke to the people to correct them:

“The light taught us not to worship him, but to only see the light.”

The Tribe Leader smiled broadly and said:

“You see, no one knows what you are talking about. We are happy with worshipping the Light. The making of Light is a deep and powerful teaching that only a few of us, the Elect, can understand and have mastered. After all, we have all that we need or want with Fire. We have enough wealth and power to take care of ourselves.”

The 4th tribe

The travellers went to the 4th Tribe. This time the next elder tried to tell the Tribe that the real name of the light is Deep. The Tribe Leaders then retorted:

“That may be so, but he was a foreigner who lived long ago. The new Light has arisen in our own country. We believe in him and are proud of him. You are all outdated; we are keeping up with the times. The wealthy, the powerful, the scholars and the professionals of the world respect us. You are forest dwellers who have lost touch with the times!”

Some of the younger travellers were visibly shaken. They moved on.

The 5th tribe

The travellers found the 5th Tribe to be the most friendly, and also the most difficult to talk with. Whatever the elders said, the Tribe Leaders would agree with:

“You are right. We have all that in our Teachings and much, much more. Our Fire is everywhere, in everything, even in everyone of us. Our Fire never came, never went, is neither in nor out, he is nowhere and everywhere. We are all burning with the Fire: you can feel our warmth! So we do not need any fire!”

Returning to the forest

The travellers decided to return to their forest and continue with their practice and teaching. Despite all the difficulties they faced, there were some from the various tribes

who were impressed with the peace and light that the travellers emanated. They had quietly followed the travellers back to the forest to learn more about the light.

Once in a while, when the time is right, or when our karma is good, we may just meet a traveller who teaches the true nature of fire, how fire becomes light, how light frees us. We only need to listen, close our eyes, and we will see the light. Just as Deep saw the light long ago, we only need to look deep within ourself.

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