

Happy prison

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A reflection on Plato's cave allegory helps us with a better understanding of true reality. Imagine, we are inmates living on a harsh island prison. In fact, we have lived on this island since we were born, and only know life on this prison island. We don't even suspect that there is anything, not to mention freedom or life, beyond our shores. So, we make the best of our prison life.

Often enough, we even think that we are enjoying it, that it is a such wonderful place. We begin to think that "prison" is a wonderful word, and write songs like, "Prison's bright and beautiful ... the good Lord made them all!" Some of us even contribute to "social service," kindly decorating the prison cells of others. We paint the cell doors with bright colours, and decorate the cells with various things.

When someone gets punished or tortured on our prison island, we think that something has gone wrong. We think someone else is to blame. When anyone points out that it is the very nature of a prison to be a place of suffering, we dismiss them as a pessimist, even being crazy. Some of our cleverer talkative leaders scold him, saying: "Get a life!"

Blame someone

One full moon night, a few of us discover a raft along the shoreline. We are not sure what it is at first. But it floats well and there are paddles which we can use to make the raft move on the water away from the shore. This is exciting! We, close friends, get on the raft and quietly paddle away as the sun rises in the horizon. We begin to see the signs of some continent in the direction where the sun has risen.

Only then, we realize that we have been imprisoned, restricted, on a small island of suffering. When we reached the continent, we find it to be a truly beautiful spacious place of freedom, full of kind people, and not a prison cell in sight. The people there, too, have escaped from the island prison. Then, we get boats and quietly returned to the island whenever the moon is full.

Good prison guards

Sadly, most of the prisoners back on the island refuse to believe us. They can't imagine anything other than their prison island with its caring prison guards who tell them stories, feed them, shelter them, and tell them just what to do. They even have begun to love them. When we tell them that prison is suffering and the freedom from prison is happiness, they accuse us of escapism.

They cannot imagine anything other than their prison, especially when they are promised of a bigger prison if they live as faithful prisoners. It really takes great effort to understand that the real world is truly a harsh prison. The Buddha and other wise people keep reminding us of this down the ages.

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