The following selection, taken from Kern's translation from the original Sanskrit rendered in 1884, contains a parable of the burning house in which the superiority of the one vehicle over the three vehicles is shown. The use of parables in Buddhist sutras inspired the rise of morality tales, which often captured the life-style and sentiment of the common man. Two of the most representative compilations of such tales were the Konjaku Monogatarishū (Tales of the Old and New), and Uji Shō Monogatari (Tales from Uji) (Documents 7–9). And through these morality tales, Buddhist teachings found greater popular acceptance.

1 A Parable of the Burning House

Let us suppose the following case, Sariputra... There was a certain housekeeper, old, aged, decrepit, very advanced in years, rich, wealthy, opulent; he had a great house, high, spacious, built a long time ago and old, inhabited by some two, three, four, or five hundred living beings. The house had but one door, and a thatch; its terraces were tottering, the bases of its pillars rotten, the coverings and plaster of the walls loose. On a sudden the whole house was from every side put in conflagration by a mass of fire. Let us suppose that the man had many little boys, say five, or ten, or even twenty, and that he himself had come out of the house.

Now, Sariputra, that man, on seeing the house from every side wrapt in a blaze by a great mass of fire, got afraid, and... calls to the boys: “Come, my children; the house is burning with a mass of fire; come, lest you be burnt in the mass fire, and come to grief and disaster.” But the ignorant boys do not heed the words of him who is their well-wisher; they are not afraid... nor know the purport of the word “burning”; they run hither and thither, walk about, and repeatedly look at their father; all, because they are so ignorant.

... The man has a clear perception of their inclinations. Now these boys happen to have many and manifold toys to play with, pretty, nice, pleasant, dear, amusing, and precious. The man, knowing the disposition of the boys, says to them: “My children, your toys, which you are so loath to miss, which are so various and multifarious, [such as] bullock-carts, goat-carts, deer-carts, which are so pretty, nice, dear, and precious to you, have all been put by me outside the house-door for you to play with. Come, run out, leave the house; to each of you I shall give what he wants. Come soon, come for the sake of these toys.” And the boys, on hearing the names mentioned of such playthings as they like and desire, quickly rush out from the burning house, with eager effort and great alacrity, one having no time to wait for the other, and pushing each other on with the cry of “Who shall arrive first, the very first?”

The man, seeing that his children have safely and happily escaped, goes and sits down in the open air on the square of the village, his heart is filled with joy and delight. The boys go up to the place where their father is sitting, and say, “Father, give us those toys to play with, those bullock-carts, and deer-carts.” Then, Sariputra, the man gives to his sons, who run swift as the wind, bullock-carts only, made of seven precious substances, provided with benches, hung with a multitude of small bells, lofty, adorned with rare and wonderful jewels, embellished with jewel wreaths, decorated with garlands of flowers, carpeted with cotton mattresses and woolen coverlets, covered with white cloth and silk, having on both sides rosy cushions, yoked with white, very fair and fleet bullocks, led by a multitude of men. To each of his children he gives several bullock-carts of one appearance and one kind, provided with flags, and swift as wind. That man does so, Sariputra, because being rich,... he rightly thinks: “Why should I give these boys inferior carts, all these boys being my own children, dear and precious? I have such great vehicles and ought to treat all the boys equally and without partiality. As I won many treasures and granaries, I could give such great vehicles to all beings, how much more then to my own children.” Meanwhile the boys are mounting the vehicles with feelings of astonishment and wonder. Now, Sariputra, what is thy opinion? Has that man made himself guilty of a falsehood by first holding out to his children the prospect of three vehicles and afterwards giving to each of them the greatest vehicles only, the most magnificent vehicle?

Sariputra answered: By no means, Lord. That is not sufficient to qualify the man as a speaker of falsehood, since it only was a skillful device to persuade his children to go out of the burning house and save their lives. Nay, besides recovering their very bodies, O Lord, they have received all those toys. If that man, O Lord, had given no single cart, even then he would not have been a speaker of falsehood, for he had previously been meditating on saving the little boys from a great mass of pain by some able device.

The venerable Sariputra having thus spoken, the Lord said to him: Very well, Sariputra, quite so; it is even as you say. So too, Sariputra, the Tathagata is free from all dangers, wholly exempt from all misfortune, despondency, calamity, pain, grief, the thick enveloping dark mists of ignorance. He, the Tathagata, endowed with Buddha-knowledge, forces, absence of hesitation, uncommon properties, and mighty by magical power, is the father of the world, who has reached the highest perfection in the knowledge of skillful means, who is most merciful, long-suffering, benevolent, compassionate. He appears in this triple world, which is like a house the roof and shelter whereof are decayed, [a house burning by a mass of misery]... Once born, he sees how the creatures are burnt, tormented, vexed, distressed by birth, old age, disease, death, grief, wailing, pain, melancholy, despondency; how for the sake of enjoyment, and prompted...

1 Adapted from H. Kern, Saddharma-Pundarika or The Lotus of the True Law (New York: Dover Publications, reissue, 1963), pp. 72–79.

2 Here the Buddha is represented as a wise and benevolent father, he is the heavenly father, Brahma. As such he was represented as sitting on a “lotus seat.”
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