



The Silent Buddha

Indian Buddhism

In Benares, in northern India, there once lived a very rich man who, on the death of his father, saw both his possessions and his wealth increase. The man wondered what he wanted so much wealth for when he already had everything he could possibly need, until he thought the best thing he could do was to share what life had given him so effortlessly with those who might need it most. And so, the rich man decided to build four soup kitchens, distributed in different areas of the city, in order to serve a hot meal a day to all those hungry people who came to them.

In those days it was known that in the outskirts of the city there was a holy man who was said to have attained the ultimate understanding. He was a Silent Buddha, an enlightened man who, as such, felt at one with everything around him, and this feeling led him to try to help all suffering beings. He was sure that their suffering would vanish as soon as he could show them the way to enlightenment.

However, those were difficult times. People had many worldly concerns and were not really interested in their spiritual growth. This made the Silent Buddha decide to go into the forest and sit there, fasting and in absolute silence, for seven days and seven nights, so further increasing his state of awakening.

But after seven days without food and drink, his health deteriorated, leaving him in a very precarious state. So he decided to go with his alms bowl to beg for some food.

As the rich man was about to eat his lunch, he saw the Silent Buddha arrive outside with his bowl and ordered one of the servants to fill the bowl with food.

But suddenly, out of nowhere, Mara, the god of death, who had been watching the Silent Buddha for days, appeared. Death was furious with him because he knew that, living in the eternal present, he lacked all desire and had lost his fear. This was what bothered Mara the most, for he knew that if the Silent Buddha did not fear death, his own power would be diminished. So, seeing him so weak, the god of death decided to act. If he could stop the Buddha from eating, he would starve him to extinction.

To prevent the servant from giving him the food, Mara stepped between them, creating a deep chasm of embers and fire. When the servant saw this, he was so frightened that he ran back to his master's house in panic and told him what had happened.

Thinking his servant was hallucinating, the rich man sent other servants to feed the holy man, but they also returned terrified. Reflecting on what had happened, it occurred to the rich man that the god Mara must be behind it all. However, the god of death did not know of his firm determination, and he decided to go himself to fill the Silent Buddha's food bowl.

When the rich man arrived and saw the flames emerging from the fiery abyss, he raised his eyes to the sky and saw the image of a god. Undeterred by fear, he addressed him.

‘Who are you?’ he asked.

‘I am the god of death!’ Mara replied.

‘And why did you create this abyss of fire?’

‘To prevent you from feeding the Silent Buddha and thus starving him to death. But I also want to prevent your good deed from advancing you on the path of enlightenment. Thus, you will all remain under my power.’

‘Well, you will not be able to kill the Silent Buddha,’ replied the rich man, ‘because you will not be able to stop me from feeding him.’

Then, turning to the holy man, he thanked him for showing everyone the way of Truth and for being a model for all; and then, stretching out his arms to him, he said:

‘Please accept this food!’

In that instant, the rich man had completely forgotten himself, thus losing his fear of death. He leaned over the fiery precipice to offer the food to the Silent Buddha, and suddenly, from the bottom of the abyss, a beautiful, fresh lotus flower sprang up and, alighting under his feet, lifted him above the flames. The pollen of the amazing flower spread through the air and covered everything as if with golden dust, and the rich man, standing in the centre of the lotus, finally dropped the food into the bowl of the Silent Buddha.

Mara had been defeated.

In gratitude, the Silent Buddha blessed him with his hand, and the rich man bowed reverently before him. He joined his hands in front of his chest and then above his head, and with the bowl full of food between his hands, the Silent Buddha finally departed from the city of Benares. □

Adapted by Marta Ventura (2024).

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Comments

This story is part of the so-called Jātaka Tales, which constitute a major collection of Buddhist sacred literature. As we pointed out in the first book of this Collection (volume 0), namely in the story of ‘The Deer King of the Banyan’, the Jātaka are a body of 547 tales containing various legends, fables and anecdotes of Buddha's previous incarnations, prior to his existence as Siddhartha Gautama between 563 and 483 b.c.e. The Jātaka tales are dated between 300 b.c.e. and 400 c.e., which means that they were produced over a period of seven centuries.

It should be noted that the reason for the silence of the Buddha in this story is, according to Sinh (2020), that this individual, although he had attained enlightenment, ‘is not able to extend his wisdom to others

because no one, at the time, is able to grasp the reality of life.’ The special role of the historical Buddha in the story is thus preserved. Sinh also points out that, in this story, through the rich man's decision to feed the Silent Buddha despite the terrible hindrance posed by Mara, the freedom of the human beings to choose and create their own reality despite impediments, by attaining a higher state of being, is highlighted.

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Sources

- Anderson, T. (1995). The silent Buddha. En *Prince Goodspeaker: Buddhist Tales for Young & Old. Vol. 1* (pp. 186-191). Tullera, Australia: Buddha Dharma Education Association Inc.
- Sinh, A. (2020). The Jataka Tales through the lens of existential and Buddhist ethics. *Confluence: Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies, IV*. Available on <https://cjids.in/volume-iv-2020/the-jataka-tales-through-the-lens-of-existential-and-buddhist-ethics-2>

Associated text of the Earth Charter

Principle 9a: Guarantee the right to potable water, clean air, food security, uncontaminated soil, shelter, and safe sanitation, allocating the national and international resources required.

Other passages that this story illustrates

Preamble – The Challenges Ahead: The choice is ours: form a global partnership to care for Earth and one another or risk the destruction of ourselves and the diversity of life.

Preamble – Universal Responsibility: Everyone shares responsibility for the present and future well-being of the human family and the larger living world.

Principle 2b: Affirm that with increased freedom, knowledge, and power comes increased responsibility to promote the common good.

Principle 9c: Recognize the ignored, protect the vulnerable, serve those who suffer, and enable them to develop their capacities and to pursue their aspirations.

