

WALKING IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THE BUDDHA

OLD PATH WHITE CLOUDS



THICH NHAT HANH

See parable
on next page.

Chapter Thirty-Two

The Finger Is Not the Moon

One afternoon Sariputta and Moggallana brought a friend, the ascetic Dighanakha, to meet the Buddha. Dighanakha was as well-known as Sanjaya. He also happened to be Sariputta's uncle. When he learned that his nephew had become a disciple of the Buddha, he was curious to learn about the Buddha's teaching. When he asked Sariputta and Moggallana to explain the teaching to him, they suggested he meet directly with the Buddha.

Dighanakha asked the Buddha, "Gautama, what is your teaching? What are your doctrines? For my own part, I dislike all doctrines and theories. I don't subscribe to any at all."

The Buddha smiled and asked, "Do you subscribe to your doctrine of not following any doctrines? Do you believe in your doctrine of not-believing?"

Somewhat taken aback, Dighanakha replied, "Gautama, whether I believe or don't believe is of no importance."

The Buddha spoke gently, "Once a person is caught by belief in a doctrine, he loses all his freedom. When one becomes dogmatic, he believes his doctrine is the only truth and that all other doctrines are heresy. Disputes and conflicts all arise from narrow views. They can extend endlessly, wasting precious time and sometimes even leading to war. Attachment to views is the greatest impediment to the spiritual path.

Bound to narrow views, one becomes so entangled that it is no longer possible to let the door of truth open.

"Let me tell you a story about a young widower who lived with his five-year-old son. He cherished his son more than his own life. One day he left his son at home while he went out on business. When he was gone, brigands came and robbed and burned the entire village. They kidnapped his son. When the man returned home, he found the charred corpse of a young child lying beside his burned house. He took it to be the body of his own son. He wailed in grief and cremated what was left of the corpse. Because he loved his son so dearly, he put the ashes in a bag which he carried with him everywhere he went. Several months later, his son managed to escape from the brigands and make his way home. He arrived in the middle of the night and knocked at the door. At that moment, the father was hugging the bag of ashes and weeping. He refused to open the door even when the child called out that he was the man's son. He believed that his own son was dead and that the child knocking at the door was some neighborhood child mocking his grief. Finally, his son had no choice but to wander off on his own. Thus father and son lost each other forever.

"You see, my friend, if we are attached to some belief and hold it to be the absolute truth, we may one day find ourselves in a similar situation as the young widower. Thinking that we already possess the truth, we will be unable to open our minds to receive the truth, even if truth comes knocking at our door."

Dighanakha asked, "But what of your own teaching? If someone follows your teaching will he become caught in narrow views?"

"My teaching is not a doctrine or a philosophy. It is not the result of discursive thought or mental conjecture like various philosophies which contend that the fundamental essence of the universe is fire, water, earth, wind, or spirit, or that the universe is either finite or infinite, temporal, or eternal. Mental conjecture and discursive thought about truth

are like ants crawling around the rim of a bowl—they never get anywhere. My teaching is not a philosophy. It is the result of direct experience. The things I say come from my own experience. You can confirm them all by your own experience. I teach that all things are impermanent and without a separate self. This I have learned from my own direct experience. You can too. I teach that all things depend on all other things to arise, develop, and pass away. Nothing is created from a single, original source. I have directly experienced this truth, and you can also. My goal is not to explain the universe, but to help guide others to have a direct experience of reality. Words cannot describe reality. Only direct experience enables us to see the true face of reality."

Dighanakha exclaimed, "Wonderful, wonderful, Gautama! But what would happen if a person did perceive your teaching as a dogma?"

The Buddha was quiet for a moment and then nodded his head. "Dighanakha, that is a very good question. My teaching is not a dogma or a doctrine, but no doubt some people will take it as such. I must state clearly that my teaching is a method to experience reality and not reality itself, just as a finger pointing at the moon is not the moon itself. An intelligent person makes use of the finger to see the moon. A person who only looks at the finger and mistakes it for the moon will never see the real moon. My teaching is a means of practice, not something to hold onto or worship. My teaching is like a raft used to cross the river. Only a fool would carry the raft around after he had already reached the other shore, the shore of liberation."

Dighanakha joined his palms. "Please, Lord Buddha, show me how to be liberated from painful feelings."

The Buddha said, "There are three kinds of feelings—pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral. All three have roots in the perceptions of mind and body. Feelings arise and pass away like any other mental or material phenomena. I teach the method of looking deeply in order to illuminate the nature and source of feelings, whether they are pleasant, unpleas-

Chapter Fifty-Seven

The Raft Is Not the Shore

That winter the Buddha stayed in Vesali. One day while he was meditating not far from Kutaragasala Dharma Hall, several bhikkhus committed suicide in another part of the monastery. When the Buddha was informed, he asked what led them to kill themselves. He was told that after meditating on the impermanent and fading nature of the body, these bhikkhus expressed aversion for the body and no longer wished to live. The Buddha was saddened to hear this. He called all the remaining bhikkhus together.

He said, "Bhikkhus, we meditate on impermanence and fading in order to see into the true nature of all dhammas so that we will not be bound by them. Enlightenment and freedom cannot be attained by escaping the world. They can only be attained when one sees deeply into the true nature of all dhammas. These brothers did not understand and so they foolishly sought to escape. By doing so, they violated the precept against killing.

"Bhikkhus, a liberated person neither clings to dhammas nor feels aversion to them. Clinging and aversion are both ropes that bind. A free person transcends both in order to dwell in peace and happiness. Such a happiness cannot be measured. A free person does not cling to narrow views about permanence and a separate self nor does he cling to narrow views about impermanence and non-self. Bhikkhus, study and practice the teaching intelligently in a spirit of non-attach-

ment." And the Buddha taught the bhikkhus the practice of conscious breathing to help them refresh themselves.

When he returned to Savatthi, the Buddha gave further teaching on breaking through attachment in response to a bhikkhu named Arittha, who was bound to narrow views because he also misunderstood the teaching. Sitting before the bhikkhus at Jetavana, the Buddha said, "Bhikkhus, if the teaching is misunderstood, it is possible to become caught in narrow views which will create suffering for oneself and others. You must listen to, understand, and apply the teaching in an intelligent manner. Someone who understands snakes uses a forked stick to pin down a snake's neck before trying to pick it up. If he picks the snake up by the tail or body, the snake can easily bite him. Just as you would use your intelligence in catching a snake, you should use it to study the teaching.

"Bhikkhus, the teaching is merely a vehicle to describe the truth. Don't mistake it for the truth itself. A finger pointing at the moon is not the moon. The finger is needed to know where to look for the moon, but if you mistake the finger for the moon itself, you will never know the real moon.

"The teaching is like a raft that carries you to the other shore. The raft is needed, but the raft is not the other shore. An intelligent person would not carry the raft around on his head after making it across to the other shore. Bhikkhus, my teaching is the raft which can help you cross to the other shore beyond birth and death. Use the raft to cross to the other shore, but don't hang onto it as your property. Do not become caught in the teaching. You must be able to let it go.

"Bhikkhus, all the teaching I have given you, such as the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path, the Four Establishments of Mindfulness, the Seven Factors of Awakening, Impermanence, Non-self, Suffering, Emptiness, Signlessness, and Aimlessness, should be studied in an intelligent, open manner. Use the teachings to help you reach liberation. Do not become attached to them."

The monastery for bhikkhunis housed five hundred nuns. They frequently invited the Buddha and other Venerables

from Jetavana to come and give them Dharma talks. Venerable Ananda was asked by the Buddha to be in charge of selecting which monks should go to deliver Dharma talks to the bhikkhunis. One day he assigned Venerable Bhandā to go. Venerable Bhandā had attained deep fruits in his practice, but he was not noted for his speaking talent. The following day, after begging and eating his meal alone in the forest, he went to the bhikkhunis' center. The sisters warmly received him and Bhikkhuni Gotami invited him to sit on the pedestal to give his Dharma talk.

After settling on his cushion, he recited a short poem:

"Dwelling in tranquility,
seeing the Dharma, returning to the source
without hatred or violence,
joy and peace overflow.
Mindfulness is held perfectly;
True peace and ease are realized.
Transcending all desires
is the greatest happiness."

The venerable said no more, but proceeded to enter into a state of deep concentration. Though his words had been few, his presence radiated peace and happiness, which most of the sisters found greatly encouraging. Some of the younger sisters, however, were disappointed by how short his talk was. They urged Bhikkhuni Gotami to ask if he might say something more. Bhikkhuni Gotami bowed to Venerable Bhandā and expressed the wish of the younger sisters. But Venerable Bhandā simply repeated the same poem again and then stepped down from the pedestal.

Some days later, the Buddha was told about Venerable Bhandā's Dharma talk. It was suggested to the Buddha that, in the future, monks more talented at speaking should give the Dharma talks. But the Buddha replied that a person's presence was more important than his words.

One morning after returning from his begging, the Buddha was unable to find Ananda. Venerable Rahula and others said they had not seen him. Then one bhikkhu reported that