



The parable of the phantom city

This is a traditional story that expresses the difference between Nikaya traditions and Mahayana traditions on the goal of the Buddhist path. The story is found in the Lotus Sutra.

The Lotus Sutra teaches the superiority of the Mahayana goal and claims the Buddha really taught 'only one single vehicle' (ekayana), not two or three, in the sense that all Vehicles of Buddhism ultimately lead to the same goal, which is buddhahood. According to this view, the teachings of Nikaya Buddhism are preliminary instructions for those with little spiritual maturity, and their goal of nirvana (nibbana), although a very worthy one, is only a temporary resting place on the long road to buddhahood.

A group of people are travelling along a road through a wild and deserted region to reach a place with many rare treasures. The journey is long and the terrain is difficult so everyone eventually becomes disheartened, frightened, and exhausted. They feel like turning around and going back.

Their compassionate leader knows the road well, however, and he encourages them to carry on. He inspires them by describing a city which is not far ahead, an oasis of calm and rest. This vision fires everyone up and they are overjoyed at the thought that the goal is not far off, so they agree to continue on their way and soon reach the city.

Upon arrival the group relaxes and enjoys everything on offer, feeling very content. But once they are well rested the leader explains that the place they are in is only a phantom city that he created through the magical power of his mind. They actually need to go a little further to find the treasures they are looking for. This news comes as a shock and a profound disappointment, so much discussion ensues. Eventually they accept they must continue the journey to the very end.

In the same way, nirvana is a resting place, the thought of which inspires those who are weary of suffering to start out on the spiritual journey.