



Story: Ananda and the river

One day, over two and a half thousand years ago, the Buddha was travelling over a long distance with his assistant, Ananda. Over the years, Ananda had spent a lot of time with the Buddha and had learnt that anything could happen at any moment during their journeys. And, perhaps more importantly, Ananda had discovered that everything the Buddha did, both small and large actions, was for the benefit of others.



Their path wound down to the river and Ananda looked up and down the length of it to find somewhere shallow enough to cross. Mostly there were only very steep banks, with the river barely accessible. They walked towards a small section where some rocks and pebbles were visible above the surface of the water and he used them as stepping stones to cross over. The Buddha stopped midstream and said, “Look, Ananda, this water is so clear and pristine, my hand can be perfectly seen.” And it was true, when the Buddha put his hand into the water, Ananda could indeed see it clearly. They steadily continued their way.

It was a hot day and the sun shone brightly. After a short while, the pair took time to rest under the shade of some trees. The Buddha took out his bowl and asked Ananda if he could please bring some crystal-clear river water to quench his thirst. Ananda was most happy to do anything for his kind teacher, but he suggested they should go instead to the next village which was only ten minutes ahead and had a deep well with sweet water. The kindly teacher smiled gently and said, “I have a particular taste for river water today and would appreciate your indulgence. It is only the river’s crystal water that I will settle for.” Ananda had been around the Buddha long enough to know that nothing was suggested on a whim, and the Buddha’s particular expression confirmed this, so Ananda returned to the river.

As he reached the river, he saw a bullock team slowly entering the clear waters at the shallow rocky section. The farmer and Ananda politely nodded their heads in greeting and said hello to each other. Ananda patiently waited until the bullock team had completed its crossing before endeavouring to fill the bowl with clear water. As he lowered the bowl down to water level, can you imagine his surprise when he noticed the river water, which only thirty minutes earlier had been so clear and refreshing, had now turned into a murky, muddy mix.



Ananda stood up and considered the situation. He observed that where the bullock team had crossed over, the mud and silt that had sat on the river bottom had been disturbed and stirred up. This changed the clear water into the muddy mix now before his eyes. Ananda scooped up a bowl of water, trying to somehow separate the mud out. He tried rocking the bowl from side to side, and even picked some of the larger particles out. Yet, no matter how much he tried, Ananda could not separate the mud from the water, and in fact the shaking and stirring made it worse. This water was not suitable for drinking.

Ananda went back to his teacher and declared the river water undrinkable. “We would do just as well to continue on our way to the village where I shall find you some fresh well water,” he said. The Buddha again gently smiled and thanked Ananda for all his efforts; however, he restated his request for clear river water. Now Ananda was rather surprised. Then he remembered the Buddha had made many such unexpected requests over the years. Over time, Ananda had been able to recognise that the Buddha’s true concern was how to help Ananda, and indeed all living beings, awaken to their full potential. He had learned that everything the Buddha did was showing his students, and those who would take the time to look, how to wake up. So, recognising things were not as his mind thought they were, Ananda returned to the river.

Upon reaching the riverbank, Ananda observed some of the muddy sediment had already begun to settle. The water was still unfit to drink so he sat on the riverbank and waited. Ananda noticed he felt impatient and agitated, so he turned his attention inward. In the beginning, the thoughts and feelings of impatience ran through his mind like a rushing waterfall. They appeared in different forms such as, “This water will never become clear again,” and, “It would be better to go to the village,” “I might starve to death!” and even, “Why do I have to wait here, why not some other mindless fool!” Fortunately, Ananda completely trusted the Buddha, and knew how to meditate and let his thoughts settle. He did not try to stop the thoughts coming, nor did he wonder if they were true or not. Ananda was simply aware of them and gave them space, without trying to change a single thing. Slowly, slowly the thoughts became fewer and fewer until eventually they were like a trickle, and Ananda was at complete ease resting peacefully.

After what seemed like only a few minutes, he turned his attention outwards again to the river. Much to his surprise, the river was once again crystal clear. He stood up and reflected on what had happened. During that time, nothing had disturbed or stirred up the river. No one had tried to get rid of the mud, or to change a single thing. The muddy particles had been left just as they were and settled on the river bed quite naturally. And, slowly, slowly, as the silt settled, the pure nature of the water was visible once again.

Ananda’s heart filled with joy and gratitude as he recognised his teacher had given him a perfect opportunity to “see” something very special. His eyes glistened with a few tears at



discovering this priceless key to unlocking the clarity of his mind. Ananda bent down and filled the bowl right to the brim with crystal clear water and returned to his teacher.

The Buddha was waiting quietly under the trees for Ananda's return. "Did you have an interesting time, Ananda?" he asked, knowingly. With a clear mind, filled with gratitude and love, Ananda replied, "Teacher, I have seen that our thoughts and feelings are like the mud in the water. We stir them up when we try to get rid of the ones that we don't like, and equally when we try so hard to hold on to and keep the ones we do like. If we stop bothering and judging them, the natural comings and goings of thoughts and feelings will simply settle of their own accord. Just like the muddy water that settled in the river, so too with our own mind. If we can simply let our mind settle, its natural clarity and purity will be evident." The Buddha nodded his head in recognition of Ananda's discovery.

With gratitude for his teacher's kindness, Ananda offered him the bowl of pure river water.