



The story of the burning house

This is a well-known story illustrating the ethical principle of skillful means characteristic of Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism. It is found in the Lotus Sutra.

Long ago in a small Indian village there lived an old man who was weak in health and strength but relatively rich and well-to-do. He had a large house, but the house was old and in a state of disrepair, with a thatched roof and only one door. One day a fire suddenly breaks out inside the house and the building begins to burn from all sides. The old man manages to get out but then, to his horror, he realizes that his young sons are still inside, busy playing with their toys. He is beside himself with fear. He knows that they are too young to understand what fire is and what danger they are in, and this is why they continue to play unawares.

So the old man cries out to his sons. “Come here, my boys, come out of the house! It is burning fiercely. If you don’t come out soon you will all be burned.” But the children take no notice of him, they are neither alarmed nor terrified and carry on playing. In desperation, the old man hatches a plan to lure them out. He calls out to the children to come out quickly because he has lots of beautiful new toys for them – bullock carts, goat carts, and deer carts. When they hear their father’s words all the children rush out of the house to see their toys. And as soon as he is assured they are safe and sound, the father takes them down to the village and buys them the best toys money can buy – ox carts!

Discussion

What should we learn from this story? *Was the old man wrong to lie to his boys, and tell them he had lots of toys for them when this was not the case?*

The Buddha says in the Sutra that he was not wrong, because he had tried conventional means and they didn’t work, and this was the only way he could save their lives.

Furthermore, this story is seen as symbolic. The burning house represents samsara, the fire represents the fire of the passions or mental poisons, the only door out of the house is the Buddhist path to liberation. The children’s unawareness in the face of danger represents our ignorance of the causes of suffering. The old man is like the Buddha who inspires us to renounce samsara and certain death.