

THE LOG OF WOOD AND THE LIFE

Once the Blessed One was staying at Kosambi, on the bank of the river Ganges. There the Teacher saw a great log being carried down the stream of the Ganges, and on seeing it, he called to his disciples saying, “Do you see that great log being carried down the stream”. And on being assured that all saw the log, the Teacher spoke thus:

“If this log does not ground on this bank of the river or the far bank, does not sink in mid-stream, and is neither cast upon a shoal nor seized either by men or non-human beings, is not caught in a whirl-pool and does not rot inwardly, that log will float down to ocean, will slide down to ocean, will tend towards ocean. Because the course of the Ganges is directed towards the ocean. In like manner, if you do not ground on this bank or that bank, if you do not sink in mid-stream, and are neither cast upon a shoal nor seized either by men or non-human beings, are not caught in a whirlpool, and do not rot inwardly – then your course will be directed towards Nibbana, you shall attain liberation – for right understanding leads to deliverance.

At these words a certain disciple said to the master: “Venerable Sir, what is the import of all these figurative expressions?” The Teacher’s solution was:-

“This bank” is a name for the six internal bases of our mental life: the sense organs and the mind as the sixth base of conscious life. “That bank” is a name for the six external bases, that is to say the adequate objects of the five senses (forms, sounds, odours, tastes and contacts), and sensations, percepts or ideas as mind data. “Sinking in mid-stream” is a name for the lure of lust, that is to say addiction to the pleasures of the senses. “Being cast upon a shoal” signifies becoming a prey to conceit of one’s personality. “To be seized by men” means to spend all one’s time in the company of men, being happy among the rejoicing, and sharing the sorrows of the sorrowing ones, always engaged in attending to all manner of business that befalls. “To be seized by non-human beings” is to live a virtuous life in the hope of being born as a result of one’s merit in one of the heavens, or becoming a “deva”, a celestial being. “Being caught in a whirlpool” is a metaphor for the pleasures of the senses. “Rotting inwardly” means vice, immortality, inner impurity, dubious conduct, being rotten within and full of lust though pretending to be living a virtuous and holy life.

This parable and its explanation is a very effective illustration of the Buddhist view of life in the words of the Buddha. It points to us what ought to be the aim of a true follower of the Enlightened One, if he wishes to practise the higher virtues praised by the Enlightened One. This sermon does not mean that a Buddhist layman must not lead a normal life but practise some kind of asceticism. It is a sermon to the homeless followers of the Buddha and to those

who at least temporarily wish to follow a more rigorous course of the practice of meditation during their free time or on a holiday. But even an ordinary Buddhist layman must not spend his whole time in tending his body, working in order to provide the means of living: and cramming his mind with worthless facts (just because we cannot help storing up for the future more than is needed); nor giving one-self entirely up to the pursuit of worldly pleasures and mere intellectual pastimes. One has no reason to be conceited, for there is little in us or about us to be proud of.

(Basic Tenets of Buddhism)