

THE PARABLE OF THE THREE CARTS AND THE BURNING HOUSE

The following parable appears in the “Simile and Parable” (third) chapter of the Lotus Sutra. Our day-to-day world is like the burning house, filled with suffering and strife. Like the wealthy man’s children, people tend to live their lives in the superficial happiness of this troubled world, absorbed in playing while all around them the fire of suffering rages. The wealthy man is the Buddha, whose vast compassion for all people is like that of a parent for a child. That compassion is embodied in the law of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. Just as the wealthy man uses the expedient of three carts to lure his children from the flames, the Buddha has employed expedient means to enable people to free themselves from suffering and find solutions to their problems.

Illustrations by Nicole Falzone

There was once a man who was very old, and very wealthy. He lived in a spacious mansion on a large estate with his many children. Also on his estate was a very old house that was falling apart. It had been built long ago but had not been cared for, and now it was in terrible condition. More than 500 people shared the many rooms of this crumbling house with animals who had taken up residence.

Predatory birds such as kites, eagles, crows and owls nested among the gaps in the rafters. Lizards and snakes, scorpions and centipedes crawled across the rotting floorboards. And wild dogs, weasels, raccoons and rats scurried in and out of the holes between the walls. The humans and the animals kept themselves alive by killing and eating each other. Demons lived on the estate too. Growling and screaming, they hunted human and animal corpses to feed on. As you can imagine, this was a terrifying place to live.

Strangely, there was only one small door to this vast house. One day, the wealthy man’s children were playing outside the door and wandered into the old building to continue their games.

The caretaker had just left to run errands when a thin tendril of smoke could be seen rising in a back corner of the ruined house. Suddenly a fierce fire broke out. The pillars and the walls blazed, and flames engulfed the entire structure. The demons, animals and humans were dying in agony from the intense heat.

The caretaker saw the fire and raced to the wealthy man’s home. “Sir!” he cried, “I have terrible news to report. The old house is on fire and your children are playing inside!”

The two of them ran to the burning house. The wealthy man went into the doorway and shouted to his children: “Get out! Hurry! The house is on fire!” But the children were so busy playing they could not hear him.

He realized that his children were completely unaware of their peril, and they would burn to death if he did not take action.

Trying to solve this dilemma, he realized that he could not carry all 30 of them at once, and if he were able to pull all of them on a surface like a table, he would not be able to get through the tiny doorway. But he could not let his children be killed by the raging fire.

He would have to think of something delightful to entice them with. Again he called out to his children: "I have wonderful new toys for you. There are three special carts, one drawn by sheep, one by deer and one by oxen. Hurry out here and get them so we can all go for a ride!"

The children rushed out of the burning mansion in search of these marvelous carts their father had promised them.

They clamored around their father, asking where their new toys were.

The man, sighing with relief that his children were safe, gathered them and took them to his treasure house. "My fortune is limitless because you are my precious children. You will each share this treasure equally."

The man presented his children with a magical cart drawn by a great white ox. It was resplendent with gold, silver and many other jewels. He told the children: "This magical cart will fly you as swiftly as the wind to any place in the universe. And as I love you all equally, here is one for each of you." The children were delighted at this and enjoyed themselves immensely.

The three carts pulled by the sheep, deer and ox are the three vehicles of Learning, Realization and Bodhisattva. Using these to draw us, his children, away from the flames, the Buddha guides us to the supreme vehicle of absolute happiness, or Buddhahood, represented by the jeweled cart drawn by the white ox. The sutra states that this magnificent cart is 500 yojana (2,175 miles) high and 500 yojana wide, and decorated with gold rings, silver ridgepoles, gold ropes and 84,000 invaluable bells. Seated inside are all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. The Buddha invites those of us who embrace Nam-myoho-enge-kyo to join him, with the promise that we will experience absolute happiness wherever we travel aboard this supreme vehicle.