

The Story of the What's-It Tree

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Keywords

Buddhism; Values and Issues: impermanence, appearance vs reality, wisdom

Notes for teachers

This story is about the perils of incomplete understanding, and the arguments that arise when everyone thinks they are right!

Having a proper understanding of reality is an important goal of Buddhism, so stories about ignorance or delusion are fairly common. In this story it is ignorance about how something (here a tree) might change radically over time that causes problems. As such it is also a story about the Buddhist teaching of impermanence, the idea that everything is in a constant state of flux and that nothing has a single and fixed essence.

The tree's Latin name is *Butea Monosperma*. An internet search for images will reveal why the four brothers were so confused. Its flowers are red and fleshy, and it looks strikingly different at different times of the year. See also the associated powerpoint document on the website, which contains some images.

This story is usefully told along with another popular Buddhist tale, about blind men trying to describe an elephant when they have only touched parts of it. This story is about only knowing parts of a whole, or only having part of the truth, so a slightly different angle to the What's-It tree.

In both stories the incomplete – and therefore competing – understandings of reality lead to quarrels, and quarreling is therefore presented as a foolish thing. Some retellings of the story of the elephant, including a famous rendition by the American poet John G. Saxe, emphasise the teaching of moral relativism. However, for Buddhists a complete understanding of truth is possible (for awakened beings such as the Buddha) but we would all be wise to accept that our *current* knowledge may be incomplete in some way.

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Questions for Discussion

Comprehension of the story

Are the brothers right or wrong when they say that they know what the tree looks like?

Why can't any of the brothers describe the tree fully?

How do you think they would describe the tree if they had all seen it at all four times of the year?

Why does the difference in what they see lead to them fighting?

How does this story compare to the story of the blind men and the elephant?

Application to other contexts

How can we be sure that we are seeing the true state of things?

In what other ways can appearances be deceptive?

What are the potential consequences of only having an incomplete view of something? Is it dangerous to only see something from one point of view?

Reflecting on wider Buddhist issues

Why did/do Buddhists use stories to illustrate the differences between appearance and reality?

Why is the ability to see the truth behind appearances important to Buddhism?

What Buddhist qualities or concepts does it relate to?

How does the tree help us to understand the doctrine of impermanence?

Sources / Further Reading

The What's-It Tree story is abbreviated from *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā* number 248, which can be found in full translation in Sarah Shaw (trans.), *The Jātakas: Birth Stories of the Bodhisatta* (Penguin, 2006) or at <http://sacred-texts.com/bud/j2/j2101.htm>

For more information about what it means to be a jataka story see separate sheet on www.storyandreligion.div.ed.ac.uk/schools/resources

The Blind Men and the Elephant is found in a Pāli text called the *Udāna*, but is also present in lots of other texts both within and outside the Buddhist tradition. There are several YouTube renditions, including of the famous verse version by John G. Saxe – see for example <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bJVbQefNXIw>

The Story of the What's-It Tree

The Buddha told this story after four monks achieved nirvana through different forms of meditation, to explain that there can be many different approaches to the same thing.

In the past, there were four princes who wanted to see a famous tree, known as the *kimsuka* or “what’s-it” tree. They asked their charioteer to take them to see it. He agreed, but instead of taking them all together, he took them one at a time, at different times in the year. He showed the older brother the tree when there were just buds on the trunk. The next he took to see the tree when the leaves were fresh and green. The next he took when the tree’s large, flesh-coloured flowers were in bloom. The youngest he took when the tree was in fruit.

Later on the princes began to talk about the nature of the what’s-it tree. One said it looked like a charred stump. Another said it was like a lovely green banyan tree. The third said it was like a mass of flesh. The last insisted it was more like an acacia tree. They began to argue, each one accusing the other of being wrong.

Their father, the king, came to know of their discussions. He explained to them that they had all seen the same tree, but in different conditions.

The Buddha explained it to the monks, saying: “At that time I was the wise king.”

The Blind Men and the Elephant

Some blind men were shown an elephant and asked to describe it. One, who had touched the head, said it was like a water pot. Another, who was familiar with the ears, said it was like a winnowing basket. Another, who had touched a leg, said an elephant was like a post. Another, who had felt a tusk, said the elephant was like a peg. Then they started to argue over who was right. But of course, they were all right, and all wrong.