

The Necklace of Water Bubbles

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[[Master's Teachings](#)]

The Buddha once told a story about a little princess. The seven-year-old princess was very pretty and bright, and was the apple of the king's eye. One day, she went out to the garden to play, accompanied by an attendant. When she reached the edge of the lake, she was delighted to see bubbles. The water falling down over the high rocks created a cascade, and as the setting sun shone on the water, the bubbles became rainbow-colored.

"How pretty!" the little princess exclaimed in delight. "I want those bubbles," she said to her attendant. But that was impossible, for as soon as one touched the bubble, it would break. The attendant tried to explain this to the young child, but to no avail. The little princess wanted the bubbles and that was that. The poor attendant didn't know what to do about such an impossible request, except to tell the king.

"Bubbles? There's no way to take them. That's impossible, my dear little one," the king explained. The young child made such a fuss that the king said to her, "Just ask for anything else, and I'll give it to you. But this...this is beyond me. I have no way of giving it to you."

The little princess stubbornly replied, "I don't want anything else. I only want these bubbles. I want them so much, but you won't give them to me. How miserable I am to have a father like you!" With that, the young child broke down in a fit of tears.

Every day, the little princess cried over the bubbles. Her tears and distress became so much that the king was forced to do something about it. He thought to himself, "Could a miracle perhaps happen? Could there be someone in this kingdom who could procure these bubbles for the little princess? Let me send out word. Whoever can accomplish this task shall be rewarded with whatever his heart desires."

As word spread, many came forward for the challenge. Every one of them failed and was punished accordingly. As time dragged on and the little princess' distress grew, so too did the king's ire and the severity of the punishments.

One day, an old man came to the palace and said to the king, "I can make a beautiful necklace of the bubbles the little princess so desires." The king was very happy to hear this. "But," the old man said, "I will need the little princess to pick out the bubbles for me." The little princess was very excited and enthusiastically set off with the old man to pick out her bubbles at the lake.

"See, princess, this is the thread I will use to string together your bubbles. Now, which bubble would you like?" The little princess looked very carefully at the bubbles and then pointed, "That one! I want that one!" The old man said, "Good. I will string it for you, but I need you to take it out of the water for me. Just give it to me and I will make a necklace with it." The little princess reached out to try to grab the bubble, but as soon as her hand touched it, it broke. She tried

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again with another bubble, but that one broke too. She kept trying all day long, but every bubble she touched broke.

As dusk began to settle and the sky began to grow dark, the old man said to the young child, "Princess, it is already getting late. We have been here all day, but how come you haven't given me any bubbles to string up for you?" The little princess looked up at her father who was standing next to her and said, "You can't take bubbles out of the water. How can they be made into a necklace?" The king replied, "Indeed, my child. Water bubbles can't be made into a necklace. It's impossible. So, how could I have possibly given you what you asked for?"

The old man, seeing an opportunity to educate the young child, said to the little princess, "Princess, even if the bubbles could be made into a necklace, they wouldn't be the most beautiful thing in the world. The most beautiful thing comes from contentment and gratitude. When you are content and grateful, your heart is very beautiful. That is the loveliest thing in the world and can never be taken away." The little princess, being very bright, understood that wanting something one can't have is a lot of suffering.

After the Buddha finished the story, he said to his disciples, "Everyone, we must understand that all things in the world are impermanent, only existing as conditions temporarily come together. Yet, we in our ignorance become very attached to these things. This is what causes us immeasurable suffering."

Everything in the world is only a composite of different elements. When these elements come together, the material thing is formed; when the elements disperse, the object ceases to exist. This is the nature of things, yet because of the feelings these material things evoke in us, we become attached to them. It is like looking into a mirror—we see our face, yet is the person in the mirror "real"? It is but an image reflected back. If we move the mirror to face a mountain, we can see the mountain reflected clearly in the mirror. Is the mountain in the mirror the real mountain? It is but an image, produced by the components of mirror and mountain, not to mention the elements that comprise the mirror itself. Can we then say that the image is real? It is not the real thing. The composite created by turning the mirror on the object, however, evokes certain sensations or feelings, and we become caught up in these feelings.

What then is there to be attached to? If we can perceive this truth, we awaken deeply. Every day, in our daily life, if we can mindfully reflect, we can touch the true nature of things around us.

From Dharma Master Cheng Yen's Talks
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