

A Thought Can Change Life's Path: The Stingy Old Man

Written by Tzu Chi Foundation
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[[Master's Teachings](#)]

Many people are blessed with material wealth and live comfortably. However, not all of them are happy because they are constantly worrying about how to protect their fortune and multiply their wealth; they don't enjoy what they have. Their worries and afflictions stem from not knowing correct life principles. The Buddha teaches us that to have blessings, we must create blessings. This is the law of karma. If people have this concept, they'll be able to better make use of their wealth. Lacking this concept may bring much misery. There is a sutra story that illustrates this.

During the Buddha's time, King Prasenajit went to see the Buddha. He was sweating profusely and looking very tired. The Buddha, surprised to see him this way, asked, "King Prasenajit, what happened to you today?"

King Prasenajit replied, "I've just returned from the house of a deceased elderly man in Sravasti. He was the wealthiest man of the city, but he passed away without anyone to inherit his fortune. He was known as a miser who was also mean to people around him, so all of his relatives left him. I went to collect his entire fortune into the state treasury according to the law of the country. It's a very tiring task."

"Was he really that rich?" asked the Buddha.

"Indeed," replied King Prasenajit, "There were tons of gold, gems, diamonds, pearls, and other treasures in his house. I spent the whole day listing out his entire fortune. On my way back to the palace, I kept pondering over the karmic affinities of this man. His carriage was old and tattered, and his horse was skinny. His clothes were made from fabrics of low quality, and he ate poorly. He was so rich; why was he so stingy? And now that he had passed away, I wondered where he had gone to. Buddha, I am here to seek answers."

The Buddha replied, "This man is now suffering in hell, yelling and crying nonstop."

"How horrific! What could he have done in his past life to deserve such wealth and fortune? And why is he suffering in hell now?" exclaimed the King.

The Buddha began telling King Prasenajit a story.

Shortly after the passing of the Kasyapa Buddha, there was a Pratyekabuddha* who went to an elderly man's house to ask for alms. The Pratyekabuddha looked very honorable and gracious, so the elderly man was full of joy. He respectfully gave him a bowl full of food. In return, the Pratyekabuddha gave blessings to the elderly man. Filled with joy, he made a wish to the Pratyekabuddha: "I hope to be born into wealthy families life after life and never fall into the three lower realms of hell, animal, and hungry ghost."

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After the Pratyekabuddha left, he turned around and saw his servants looking at him as if they were saying, "If you can give such good food to the Pratyekabuddha, can we have some food too?"

In a split second, anger rose in him and the elderly man regretted giving alms to the Pratyekabuddha. He told himself that in the future, even with a great fortune, he would not spend money on himself, much less on others.

With the merits of having given alms to the Pratyekabuddha, the elderly man was reborn into wealthy families life after life. However, despite his wealth, he was stingy and led a miser's life in every lifetime.

King Prasenajit was curious. "Why does he have such a stingy nature?"

"It is because he does not know that generous giving creates more blessings for himself."

"What about his next life? Will he be born into a rich family again?"

"I'm afraid not," said the Buddha. "He used up all the blessings he gained from giving alms to the Pratyekabuddha. He will be suffering for a long period of time in hell. When he is reborn into the human realm again, he will lead a life full of hardship and sufferings."

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Without the Dharma to guide him in life, this old man did not know he can create blessings through being generous. Thus, despite having abundant wealth, he missed many opportunities to create blessings. The Buddha teaches us that we cannot bring material wealth with us to our next life; we can only make use of it in this life. With this concept in mind, let us seize every moment to create blessings.

* In Buddhism, a Pratyekabuddha is one who has attained enlightenment through his own efforts, as distinct from one who reaches the goal by listening to the teachings of a Buddha.

From Dharma Master Cheng Yen's Talks

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