

Parable of the Gem in the Robe **Illustration by Akio Matsuyoshi**

A POOR man came to visit a wealthy friend. Late into the night, the two friends ate, drank and talked. When the poor man went to bed, he fell into a deep sleep.

In the middle of the night, a messenger came to inform the rich man that he must go immediately to a distant land far away. Before he left, he wanted to do something for his poor friend to show how much he cared for him. But he did not want to wake his friend from such a deep sleep.

So the wealthy friend sewed a beautiful colored gem inside the hem of his poor friend's robe. This jewel had the power to satisfy all of one's desires.

The next morning, the poor man awoke to find himself alone in his wealthy friend's house. Totally unaware of anything that had taken place while he was sleeping, he wandered off.

The poor man traveled from place to place, looking for work. All the while, he was completely unaware that he possessed a priceless gem in the hem of his robe.

A long time had passed until one day, by chance, his wealthy friend came upon him as he wandered destitute in the street. Seeing the man's impoverished condition, the wealthy friend asked him: "Why have you allowed yourself to become so poor? You could have used the jewel that gave you to live your life in comfort. You must still have it, yet you are living so miserably. Why don't you use the gem to get what you need? You can have anything you want!"

Bewildered, the poor man fumbled through the inside of his robe and, with the help of his friend, found the gem. Ashamed of his ignorance, yet overcome with joy, he realized for the first time the depth of his friend's compassion. From then on, the poor friend came to own many precious things and satisfied all of his desires.

The Gem **By Crispin Reedy, Dallas**

The rags that hang about me—how foolish now!
These tatty sandals, big toe a-poke, this dusty hovel—how silly I have been.
Feel now along the margin of my robe. There, in the hem, that lump.
Heft the weight, draw it forth. Wrapped in a scrap
of faded yellow cloth. Unroll it.
There it lies, winking and glimmering in my work-hardened brown palm.
Blue sparks, fire shining in its depths.
Heart's desire, glittery blossom. So close, these many years,
and I so blind. I smile. See what great treasure has always been mine?

Commentary on the Gem **By John Gallagher, Dallas**

THE "Parable of the Gem in the Robe" describes the condition of ignorance that all humans originally have of the inherent worth of their lives, as well as the lives of

others. Although possessing the means to end his suffering, the man in the parable is unaware of the valuable gem his friend has sewn into his robe for the purpose of ending the man's poverty.

In the story, the poor man is unaware of this hidden gem because he was asleep when his wealthy friend sewed it into his robe, and was never told of its presence since the wealthy man left his guest before he awoke.

Shakyamuni used this parable to describe his own disciples' forgetting their former lives when they were taught the Law. Nichiren Daishonin uses the parable to refer to the fundamental darkness that prevents people from realizing their identity as Buddhas. One might wonder why it is that human beings must continually relearn of their inherent Buddha nature lifetime after lifetime.

Looking at Shakyamuni's life, we see that although he had attained enlightenment many lifetimes before, he still went through many hardships to become a Buddha in India under the bodhi tree. Even the Daishonin had to leave his home as a boy and singlemindedly pursue the answer to life's mystery. From them we can see that the experience of the poor man in the parable is, in a sense, repeated by all of us since we are not immediately aware of our Buddha nature. We must learn to live correctly, to overcome suffering and be compassionate. Our lack of expertise in these endeavors is often quite alarming.

In our quest, we are aided by teachers or mentors in life. And so we see that this is the way Buddhahood emerges from life—a gradual transformation of fundamental darkness into the Buddhahood of absolute freedom—through personal effort and the guidance of dedicated teachers. For each individual, this process is unique and unfolds in unpredictable ways, full of pitfalls and opposition. Those who persevere discover the hidden jewel; those who don't, continue to live in darkness just as the poor man in the parable. □