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Editor-In-Chief: Dr. Vishwanath Bite



Managing Editor: Madhuri Bite

The Hermit and His Disciples

(An old fable of India translated into English)

Ramesh Chandra Tiwari

Bahraich, India

‘Those who learn from their own mistakes are successful persons, but those who also learn from the mistakes of others are greats. However, a person with any amount of information cannot be called an intellect unless he puts that into practice.’ –Acharya Kautilya

Deep in the forest, there lived a hermit. He loved the parrots that nested on the trees round his hut. One day he thought to teach them a clever lesson, so he called them over to where he was sitting in the yard. As the parrots, too, had a great love for the hermit, they soon flew down and sat in rows on the ground facing him.

The hermit made disciples of them all, then asked, ‘Can you repeat what I say word for word?’

‘Yes, *Gurudev*,’ they replied.

‘Then go on with it and say “A trapper may come here”.’

‘A trapper may come here,’ they echoed.

‘Spread a net,’ he went on.

‘Spread a net,’ they parroted.

‘Strew it with grain.’

‘Strew it with grain.’

‘But we won’t fall into the trap.’

‘But we won’t fall into the trap.’

Thus he took an hour’s class of exercising to it every morning and drummed these words into them in a month.

The following month he asked them to repeat the whole sentence (A trapper may come here, spread a net, strew it with grain, but we won’t fall into the trap.) after him. The parrots successfully started doing that, too, and had to undergo this sort of exercise for the whole of this month. Then, in the third month of their exercise, each one of them was asked to recite the saying to the class. Finally, from the fourth month onwards, the parrots began to chant it all the time.

One day a trapper really came there. But when he listened to what the parrots were chanting, he was disappointed. At first he thought to retrace his way, then later he decided that he would do his job no matter what the result.

He spread the net on the ground, scattered rice grains over it and hid behind a tree, holding the other end of the cord. A few minutes later, one of the parrots swooped down and landed on it. Then another one followed it. Slowly the whole flock of them gathered there. They started eating the grains, clattering, 'A trapper may come here, spread a net, strew it with grain, but we won't fall into the trap'. The trapper behind the tree quickly pulled on the rope and all the parrots got trapped.

The trapper became very happy because he had notched up a big gain that day. He put the bag of his net on his back and headed for home, smiling at their mantra which they were still declaiming.

Luckily, the hermit was coming in his direction with a *kamadal* in his hand. When he listened to the voices of his disciples, he was startled. He quickened his pace and, as he came closer, he saw that his students were repeating the proverb in the bag of the net slinging over the back of the trapper. He felt very sorry for them. He asked the trapper to release them, but he refused saying that those parrots were his chattels because he had trapped them. The hermit then made every attempt to persuade him but he just would not listen to reason. At last, the hermit offered a precious stone for all those parrots, whereupon the trapper agreed and after taking that exorbitant price he freed the birds.

The hermit felt very angry with them. 'Go and assemble in the yard as you had been doing before,' he asked them and headed for his hut. After half an hour, he came out of the door with a mat in his hand and walked over to where his disciples sat waiting. He stretched the mat and sat opposite them.

'Do you know what I taught to all of you?' he asked them.

'Yes,' they replied and started reciting the maxim which they had learnt from him.

'What do you understand by it?' he asked again.

'We don't know,' they answered.

'Then you know what happened to you today?' he demanded.

'Yes, the trapper snared us all.'

'Even though you had been taught that a trapper may come here, spread a net, strew it with grain, but you won't fall into the trap!'

‘Oh yes - we never tried to understand what it really meant!’ cried all with their heads hung with shame. ‘Our dear, dear *gurudev*, we’ll never repeat this sentence, but rather abide by the rule contained in it.’