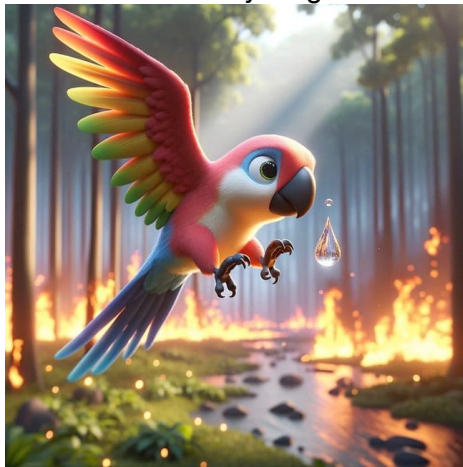


The Quail, the Parrot, and the Burning House: on the paradox of thriving when the world is on fire

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This presentation dips into three famous parables from the Buddhist tradition, exploring how each offers teachings on how to live in apparently hopeless times. The first is the story of a little quail who is abandoned by his parents when the forest catches fire: too young to fly away, the quail is left to fend for itself amidst the blaze. The second is the story of a parrot who sees that the forest is on fire and, without hope, attempts to extinguish the conflagration with water droplets squeezed from her feathers. And the third is the story of some children living in a burning house, who don't even notice that everything around them is on fire.



Each of these stories, in various ways, participates in the symbolism of fire established by the Buddha himself in one of his earliest teachings, the *Ādittapariyāya Sutta*, in which he explains that ‘all is burning.’ That is, as we might say today, the world is on fire, often literally but also metaphorically. So, how can we live in the midst of flames with happiness and peace?

In general, Buddhist philosophy, especially Mahayana Buddhist philosophy, is skeptical about hope, identifying it with one of the ‘three fires’ that cause suffering: the desire for things to be different than they are. Indeed, an influential slogan in the Tibetan tradition (Lojong #26) is: ‘abandon all hope of fruition.’ Our hope for the future resides in not hoping.

Far from being a call to passivity or despair, this teaching is supposed to encourage us to embrace uncertainty and ‘not-knowing’ about the future. Even when the future looks bleak or desperate, we never know how things will actually turn out – the future is always indeterminate. And, likewise, we never know exactly the consequences of our actions (we know only that our actions will have consequences).

Hence, Mahayana Buddhist ethics direct us to live in a *place of not-knowing*. This does not mean abandoning plans or skillful actions; rather, on this account, abandoning hope of fruition does not undermine our effectiveness, it enables us to thrive in the present moment even as we work amidst the flames – it offers us joy and integrity and love in the present. On this account, seeing the fire clearly is already alleviating the suffering it causes. This involves a shift in our awareness of what it means to *be* in the first place.

Because the idea of abandoning hope in order to live a happy, compassionate, efficacious, and full life can be difficult to accept, Buddhist teachings deploy parable and storytelling to help us. The little quail, the heroic parrot, and the flame-wrapped children show the way.