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A Buddhist story and the art of asking questions
(from the eighth grade on)

Notes for the teacher

Objectives

For pupils to enjoy listening to a good story while getting practice in reading and speaking.
For pupils to get a feel for the fundamentals of Buddhism.
For pupils to have the chance to reflect on the meaning of life.

The topic

Suggested treatment

Step 1

The teacher gives a brief presentation about Buddha and Buddhism:

“Buddha was born Siddhartha Gautama in the sixth century B.C. in what is now Nepal. He was a prince of the Shakya clan and his father, the king, sheltered him away from all misery. So he grew up happy, got married and had a son. But during four trips away from the palace Siddhartha encountered four signs – an old man, a sick man, a corpse, and a monk. The first three signs showed him human suffering; the fourth his destiny. He left the palace and after nine years on his own he settled under a bodhi tree, where he vowed to meditate until he solved the problem of suffering. After forty-nine days and forty-eight nights Siddhartha achieved enlightenment. He became the Buddha.

Buddhists have their own sacred texts just like Christians have the Bible and Muslims the Koran. And they have rituals, monks and monasteries.

One Buddhist teaching is that one’s fate is determined from within, not set by what happens from without, from our environment and the world that surrounds us. Wisdom does not come from studying the world but from cultivating the power of the mind and from self-reflection. Buddhism teaches “emptiness”. We should empty our minds through prayer and meditation.”

During this presentation, we recommend that the teacher uses a simple sandwich-technique for explanations. Whenever he uses an unknown word, he interrupts himself and simply gives a translation as if speaking aside, i.e. he changes his voice. He then starts the sentence again and finishes without a translation.

Step 2

The teacher reads the story out loud, trying hard to read with passion and emphasis. He should know the text well, make pauses in the appropriate places, translate words (if necessary) using the sandwich-technique, and give special emphasis where it is needed. He should also try to maintain eye-contact with his class. This is difficult. Practise in front of a mirror.

Step 3

The teacher hands out the text sheet. Pupils read the text silently and may ask questions if they don't understand some words.

Step 4

Read-and-look-up technique. "You are now going to read the text again, more or less sentence by sentence, in a very special way:

- First we look at a sentence or part of a sentence and read it silently.
- Then we look away from the text and turn it towards our bodies, resting it on our chests like this (teacher demonstrates).
- Then we quietly say the sentence out loud. Mutter the sentence. Don't shout, but I have to see your lips moving.
- Then we look at the text again and start reading again from where we stopped before.
- Everybody at their own speed."

This can be done while walking around in the classroom.

Step 5

Students do worksheet 1: Language mix. Whole-class activity. Teacher in charge. Teacher calls on a student to read the text slowly, without saying the German words. These should be simultaneously replaced by the original words which, hopefully, the student remembers.

Step 6

Students do worksheet 2: Falsified text
Individual work. This gives the teacher a break where he can concentrate on the question & answer work in step 7.

Step 7

Teacher asks questions on the text, using the question sheet. He can also ask the easy comprehension questions after step 3 or 4, reserving only the inferential questions for a concluding activity which marks the true culmination point of the lesson.
(See also David Cross, *A practical handbook of language teaching*. London: Prentice Hall, 1992, chapter 6: "Oral work. Elicitation techniques.")

Textsheet

A Buddhist story

1

This is a story about two Buddhist monks from China, Hsuan and Chang, who undertook a long journey, wandering from monastery to monastery. They wanted to learn more about the Buddha's teachings, his miracles, and the traditions of other monasteries. They wanted to be instructed by fellow monks and learned men to enrich their inner lives. They wanted to achieve what all monks seek: enlightenment. Not riches nor renown, but wisdom. They wanted the truth, because they knew that the truth can set us free.

2

Travelling was not easy in those days. There were deserts and sandstorms and wild beasts in the mountains, and the roads and paths were not easy to recognize. There had been heavy rainfalls and halfway through their journey they reached a crossroad where a gigantic puddle of mud had formed. Water, water everywhere, and because the water was muddy and brown, you could not see how deep it was. But one could see the roads on the other sides. A young woman in a lovely kimono was standing at one corner looking forlorn. Hsuan went up to her and asked if she needed help getting across the little lake. She said she did. "Well, then", Hsuan exclaimed, "jump up on my back." She jumped on his back, and he waded across the lake and gently put her down on the other side. Then Hsuan and Chang continued their journey in silence. Nobody said a word about the incident.

3

They arrived at their destination just before nightfall, tired and hungry. They washed and were fed a good meal by the other monks. It was only after dinner that Chang spoke to his companion again. "Hsuan", he said, "how could you? How could you carry that woman? You know that we monks are not supposed to have anything to do with women. Yet, you even invited one to jump on your back. And not only that, she was young and beautiful, very shapely, with a slim waist... Oh, you know what I mean. What might people have said if they had seen us? Don't you think you disgraced our vows and our order? How could you?"

Hsuan was looking down, but now he raised his head and their eyes met. "Chang, are you still carrying around that young woman?" he asked quietly. "Why, I put her down more than six hours ago."

Words:

monk	a man who is one of a group of men who do not marry and usually live together in a monastery because of religious beliefs
monastery	a large building or group of buildings in which monks live and worship
miracle	an unusual or mysterious event that is often thought to be caused by a god
enlightenment	the highest spiritual state that can be achieved
renown	the state of being famous
beast	a wild animal, or (<i>informal</i>) an unpleasant, annoying or cruel person
kimono	a long, loose piece of clothing with wide sleeves, traditionally worn by the Japanese
forlorn	alone and unhappy; left alone and not cared for
incident	an event which is either unpleasant or unusual
vow	to make a determined decision or promise to do something
order	a group of people who join together and live according to particular rules

Worksheet 1

Read the text. As you read, replace the German words in brackets with the original words from memory, without saying the German words.

A Buddhist story

1

This is a story about two Buddhist (Mönche) from China, Hsuan and Chang, who undertook a long (Reise) through China, wandering from monastery to monastery. They wanted to learn more about the Buddha's teachings, (seine Wunder), and the traditions of other monasteries. They wanted to be instructed by fellow monks and learned men to (bereichern) their inner lives. They wanted to achieve what all monks seek: (Erleuchtung). Not riches nor (Ruhm), but wisdom. They wanted the truth, because they knew that the truth can (uns befreien).

2

Travelling was not easy in those days. There were deserts and sandstorms and wild beasts in the mountains, and the roads and paths were not easy to recognize. There had been (schwere Unwetter) and halfway through their journey they reached a crossroad where a gigantic (Schlamm-Pfütze) had formed. Water, water everywhere, and because the water was muddy and brown, you could not see how deep it was. But one could see the roads (am anderen Ende). A young woman in a lovely kimono was standing at one corner looking forlorn. Hsuan went up to her and asked if she needed help getting across the little lake. She said she did. "Well, then", Hsuan exclaimed, "jump up on my back." She jumped on his back, and he waded across the lake and (sanft) put her down on the other side. Then Hsuan and Chang continued their journey in silence. Nobody said a word about the (Zwischenfall).

3

They arrived at their (Zielort) just before nightfall, tired and hungry. They washed and were fed a good meal by the other monks. It was only after dinner that Chang spoke to his (Begleiter / Kamerad) again. "Hsuan", he said, "how could you? How could you carry that woman? You know that we monks are not supposed to have anything to do with women. Yet, you even invited one to jump on your back. And not only that, she was young and beautiful, very shapely, with a (Schlanke Taille)... Oh, (du weißt schon, was ich meine). What might people have said if they had seen us? Don't you think you disgraced our (Gelübde) and our order? How could you?"

Hsuan was looking down, but now he raised his head and (ihre Blicke trafen sich). "Chang, are you still carrying around that young woman?" he asked (ruhig). "Why, I put her down (vor mehr als sechs Stunden)."

Worksheet 2

This version of the story contains some factual errors. Read through the passage again, cross out the wrong words or expressions and write the correct words in the margin. Also, insert words where they are left out. Try to reconstruct the original text. The first item has been done for you.

A Buddhist story

1

This is a story about ~~three~~ Buddhist monks from China, Hsuan and two Chang, who undertook a short journey through China, wandering from monastery to monastery. They wanted to learn more about the Buddha's teachings, his misdeeds, and the traditions of other monasteries. They wanted to instruct their fellow monks and learned men to enrich their inner lives. They wanted to achieve what all monks have: enlightenment. Not riches nor renown, but wisdom. They wanted the truth, because they knew that the truth can make us slaves.

2

Travelling was easy in those days. There were deserts and sandstorms and wild lions in the mountains, and the roads and paths were easy to recognize. There had been heavy rainfalls and halfway through their journey they reached a crossroad where a small puddle of mud had formed. Water, water everywhere, and because the water was muddy and brown, you could not see how shallow it was. But one could see the roads on the other side. A young woman in jeans was standing at one corner looking happy. Hsuan went up to her and asked if she needed help getting across the little lake. She said she did. "Well, then", Hsuan exclaimed, "jump up on my back." She jumped on his back, and he waded across the lake and gently put her down on the other side. Then Hsuan and Chang continued their journey in silence. Nobody said a word about the woman.

3

They arrived at their destination just before midnight, thirsty and hungry. They washed and were fed a good meal by the other monks. It was only after dinner that Chang spoke to his companion again. "Hsuan", he said, "how could you? How could you carry that woman? You know that we monks are not supposed to have anything to do with ordinary people. Yet, you even invited one to jump on your back. And not only that, she was young and beautiful, very tall, with a slim waist and... Oh, you know what I mean. What might people have said if they had seen us? Don't you think you disgraced our vows and our friendship? How could you?"

Hsuan was looking down, but now he raised his head and their eyes met. "Chang, are you still thinking of that young woman?" he asked quietly. "Why, I put her down more than six days ago."

Teacher's question sheet

Yes-no questions and true-false statements

These questions are especially useful in mixed ability classes where teachers want to involve less able students. They must be delivered quickly: rapid-fire questions and statements by the teacher, and quick "yes" or "no" responses from the students. We simply want to make sure that the pupils have understood the text.

Is it a story about Indian monks?

Were they Buddhists?

Did they go on a long journey?

Did they want to find out ways to get rich?

Did they seek wisdom?

These monks were pilgrims, weren't they?

They went on a kind of pilgrimage, didn't they?

After heavy rainfalls, the roads can become slippery, can't they?

Did they come to a place where the road was under water?

And they met a woman with two lovely children at this place, didn't they?

Did one of the monks help the woman?

When they continued their journey, did they talk about the woman?

etc.

They wandered from village to village, right?

Most monks are quite tall.

Walking in the wild mountains is easy.

Walking through the wild countryside can be dangerous.

A monastery is a place for family holidays.

Hsuan and Chang were given a good meal by the other monks.

They never talked about what happened at the mud puddle.

etc.

Choice-questions

The students have to say more than just yes or no, but the answers are already built into the questions. Again rapid-fire questions and answers.

Did the monks want to get rich or did they seek enlightenment?

Did the woman jump on Hsuan's back or was she carried by the two monks together?

Were they fed a good meal or a poor meal?

Did Chang praise or criticise his companion for having helped the woman?

Were the monks Buddhists or Christians?

WH short-answer questions

Don't expect your students to answer in "complete" sentences. Most questions can be answered by a short phrase. Again a fast delivery is important.

Who undertook this journey from one monastery to another?

What did they want to achieve?

How did the monks travel? On horseback?
Why didn't they take a train?
What makes mountain paths slippery?
Which word do we use when we walk through water?
What do we call a place that we want to get to, that we want to reach at the end of a journey?
What did the woman wear?
What did Hsuan ask her?
What does Chang reproach his companion for?

Inverted WH-questions and speech prompts

These questions tend to elicit a sentence length answer or more. However, they don't require original thinking, in many cases the answers can be taken from the text.

Tell me why the monks wandered from one monastery to the other.
Explain why travelling in those days was dangerous.
Talk about what happened halfway through the monks' journey.
Describe the situation where the road was submerged / under water.
Who knows why Chang was worried about what Hsuan had done?

Inferential, speculative and personal questions, and the shift from medium-orientation to message-orientation

Many teachers fail to use these questions, because they make greater linguistic demands on all participants. Inferential questions require a thoughtful and creative response. Students cannot derive the answers from the text, they have to make inferences and compose original utterances. They have to give their opinions and reactions. The teacher's job is also more difficult because the students' answers cannot be predicted, and it is therefore his/her job to help them reformulate and rephrase their answers, if they can't express themselves clearly and accurately. Students may really get involved in the ideas, persons and events presented by a text, and thus medium-oriented communication shifts to message-orientation. This is the proper culmination of working with texts, so this step should never be omitted.

Explain why monks should take vows.
Do you know a monk or a nun personally, and do you understand why they became a member of a religious order? Why should one want to live a life of poverty, a life of worldly renunciation (Verzicht, Askese)?
(There can be something powerfully reassuring in being a member of an order. It may give people a place to stay, a sense of belonging, and a firm purpose in life, fulfilment... Perhaps they want to create a sense of unity in their lives)
Do you know any other people who have been on a pilgrimage and why they did it?
What are pilgrims looking for?
(A pilgrimage can be a route of spiritual adventure, you may also encounter other pilgrims...)
Do you sometimes feel the need to escape from the comfortable cage that your parents might have created for you?
Are you eager to do something for yourself, to venture out into the world, to venture far away, to some distant shore?