

The Cities

“The more fully one understands suffering, and the various kinds of suffering that we are subject to, the deeper will be one’s level of compassion.”

—His Holiness the Dalai Lama

You ask me why I am here and I will tell you. It is all because of a dream I had when I was still a young man. I had been born to a wealthy family and my parents had provided me with everything I wanted. They firmly believed, they *knew*, that when I grew up I would become a rich and successful man like my father.

But then I had the dream. And on the morning after, I left my father’s house for good, never to return. There was much that I would never see if I remained content with the life that had been planned for me.

I wandered aimlessly, having no plans and no goals. I would accept whatever the world brought me. I walked silently through the city streets, then through the countryside, with its fields and hills and streams, never knowing exactly where I was or where I was going. It would be wrong to say that I was lost. Wherever I happened to be, I knew exactly where I was simply because I was there.

One night I was standing on the banks of a wide river, so wide that I could just barely see the other side. There was a small dock with a boat tied to it. A man was sitting inside the boat and, when he saw me passing by, called out, “Care for a ride?”

“No, thank you,” I said.

“Where are you going?”

“Nowhere.”

“I will take you there,” the man said.

“Whatever do you mean?” I asked.

“Just as I said. I will take you nowhere,” the boatman replied.

The man motioned for me to get into the boat, so I stepped inside and took a seat in the bow. The man untied the moorings and pushed the boat away from the dock.

“It looks like you’re pretty far from home,” the man said, settling down in the stern, his hand taking the rudder.

“I have no home,” I replied.

“Perhaps you will find one,” the man said again.

The boatman guided the craft into the middle of the river, where it caught a powerful current.

“Have you seen much of the world?” the boatman asked.

“Hardly,” I said. “I have only traveled where my feet could take me.”

“Then let me show you some places that are impossible to get to on foot.”

“Take me wherever you like.”

“But I warn you, after this journey you will never be able to return to the world as you have known it.”

“I am weary of the world as I have known it.”

The boatman was silent for a moment and then said, “I gather that you come from a wealthy family.”

“How do you know that?”

“From your hands. They’re so small and tender. The hands of a working man are large and tough.”

“Well, you’re right,” I said. “I don’t have much experience using my hands for anything except putting on my clothes.”

“And fine clothes they are!” the man exclaimed. “You must be a prince!”

I did not reply.

“Well, they told me you were coming.”

“They? Who are ‘they?’”

The man did not reply.

We traveled rapidly downstream, with nondescript shorelines on either side. In the moonlight I

could see that the fields were bare and uncultivated. There was no sign of human habitation.

After traveling for some time, I saw dark shapes on the horizon.

“Behold, the first city,” the boatman said. He guided the boat to the left bank and let it drift slowly along the shoreline to the landing, where the boat finally stopped.

The city was enormous. The angular skyline could barely be seen against the dark of the night. The buildings were soot black and windowless. The narrow streets between the buildings were deserted.

Then the streets slowly filled with people. At first they were only shadows, hunched over and walking slowly. They were coming toward the boat. A decrepit old man was leading the others to the landing. Behind him were men walking with canes and women with withered skin hanging in folds on their creaky bones. Their eyes were sunk deeply in their sockets. They were centuries old, so frail that they barely seemed to be alive.

As the mass of people approached the landing, the leader of the group called out to the boatman, “Let the boy off!” And then to me, “Please come ashore.”

I hesitated. “Must I get off?”

“The decision is yours,” said the boatman.

The leader stepped onto the landing and was standing directly in front of me.

“Come,” he said with a feeble smile. “We will teach you the secrets of longevity—of how to never die.”

The leader motioned with his hand for me to disembark. I looked at the boatman.

“Wouldn’t you like to live forever?” the boatman said.

“Of course, I would like to live forever. Everyone wants to live forever.”

“Then you should join them.”

“Do you mean the people here never die?”

“Yes, they never die,” the boatman said. “They are immortal. Their city gets bigger and bigger every day, filled with those who crave eternal life. Since none of them ever die, their city is quite crowded. But I’m sure they would make room for you.”

“This is not eternal life,” I said.

“You are mistaken,” the boatman said. “This is precisely what eternal life is like: to live and never die.”

“Then take me away from here. I no longer wish to live forever. Not like this.”

The boatman shrugged his shoulders. “Indeed, some things are worse than death, but it’s up to you,” he said. He pushed the boat away from the landing. As the boat left the shore, I could hear the people crying behind me, “Please, don’t go. Please stay with us! We will unlock the door of eternity for you!”

The boat caught the main current again. The cries of the people became whispers and then disappeared altogether.

The boatman took his hand off the rudder and leaned back in the stern. The boat drifted aimlessly down the river. I could see rocks sticking up through the water and was afraid that we would hit one of them. But the boatman sat there calmly, leaving the boat to guide itself.

“Where are you taking me?” I asked.

“I am not taking you anywhere,” the boatman replied. “It is the boat that is taking us.”

“And where, might I ask, is the boat taking us?”

“Wherever it takes us.”

“But what if I don’t want to go there?” I said. “I am not your prisoner, you know.”

“Indeed, if you want to leave, you can. You can get out of the boat anytime and swim to shore if you like. But I was told that you would want to see this journey through to its very end.”

I sat silently in the boat as it took us further downstream. The boatman began singing songs in a language I did not understand. I closed my eyes and listened to the floating melodies. The boat went up and down with the currents.

Suddenly the singing stopped. I looked up abruptly.

“Ahead is the next city,” the boatman said, putting his hand back on the rudder and guiding the boat once again to the shore.

The second city was more a village than a city. It was surrounded on all sides by a jungle. In the clearing there were several small huts. A huge bonfire was burning close to the waterfront. The villagers

were gathered around it. They did not seem to notice us as we noiselessly approached the shore.

In the bright light of the bonfire I could see the faces of the villagers. Their cheeks were scarred with ugly ulcerations. New sores had broken out on top of the old ones. They were oozing with blood and pus.

The villagers were preparing for a ritual. A woman was standing behind the bonfire, raising her arms into the air.

“Come to me!” she shouted. “Come, everyone who is sick, all who are diseased. Come to me and you will have no more pain!”

The woman stretched out her hand. It was abscessed, just like her face. She put her hand directly into the fire and held it there for a few moments. When she finally withdrew it, the skin was black and scorched.

“See,” she cried. “I have placed my hand in this fire and yet I feel no pain!”

The villagers came close to the fire and began to put their festering arms and legs into the flames.

“Yes,” they shouted. “We feel no pain!”

One man, his entire body covered with buboes, suddenly rushed up to bonfire and jumped into it.

“My baptism,” he proclaimed triumphantly. “My baptism by fire!”

Flames engulfed the man. He could no longer be seen. But his voice roared out from the inferno, “I feel no pain! I feel no pain!”

All of the villagers cheered in reply.

“Don’t you pity them?” the boatman asked me.

“But they feel no pain,” I said.

“That is precisely why they should be pitied.”

“Perhaps I should go to help them.”

“If you wish. But it won’t do any good.”

“I would heal them.”

“They do not wish to be healed. Their only desire is to suffer no pain.”

“But surely they are not happy.”

“No, the people are very happy just as they are. They will endure any illness as long as they feel no pain. Would you deprive them of their happiness by healing them and restoring their pain? Would you yourself not wish to live without pain?”

I looked back at the villagers and then to the boatman. “Take me away from this place,” I told him.

“As you wish,” he replied.

We had gone only a short distance when the boatman announced that we were approaching the third city. In an instant the night turned bright. The stars became torches. The moon burned like the sun.

The boatman turned the boat once again towards the bank of the river. I could see no city, only the ruins of one. Spires had fallen to the ground. The pillars held no ceilings. The walls had collapsed. Rubble was lying on the ground. Stones were piled one on top of another. The wind had blown sand over some of them. The only building still standing was a huge circular tower with vultures hovering above it.

As the boat pulled closer to the shore, I could see bones scattered among the ruins, some of them nearly covered by the sand. Then I saw a man, a skeleton actually, standing in front of the ossuary, shaking sand from his bones. He held a conductor’s baton in his boney fingers.

Other skeletons got up from where they lay and rattled over to join him. Their jawbones were turned upward in smiles. One of them was carrying a clarinet, another a violin. Others followed with trumpets, flutes, trombones, and other musical instruments.

When the musicians had assembled themselves in front of the skeleton with the baton, he bowed toward the boatman and then to me. For a moment all was silent. Then the conductor turned to the musicians. With a flourish of his baton, the orchestra began playing a minuet.

More skeletons appeared from behind the tower. They formed themselves into couples and began dancing, their joints grating against each other in jerky but exuberant movements. The conductor looked over his shoulder at us from time to time, his lipless mouth frozen in a perpetual smile. His skull rattled up and down in rhythm with the music.

When the piece was over, the dancers politely applauded, gnashing their hands together with each

clap. The conductor, still smiling, bowed and bowed in appreciation.

The boatman began applauding, too. His fleshy claps were quite distinguishable from those of the dancers. The conductor came over and motioned with a long bony arm for us to get out of the boat.

“He cannot speak,” the boatman explained. “He has no vocal cords. He’s asking if you would like to join in the next dance.”

I motioned with my hands that I did not wish to leave the boat. The sockets in the conductor’s skull peered at me imploringly.

“Why is he looking at me like that?”

“He was unable to find joy when he was alive. He and the others saw life as a vale of tears. They longed to leave their trials and tribulations behind them. Everything they encountered brought them grief. They suffered from old age and disease, of course, just like the others. But they could take pleasure neither in a field of flowers nor the setting of the sun. They despised the earth and all that was in it. They believed that paradise was a heavenly kingdom awaiting them beyond the grave. Now they live in permanent bliss in the ruins of this celestial city, enjoying all the gaiety and merriment they denied themselves when they were still alive.”

Although the conductor had no ears, he heard what the boatman had said. He returned to the orchestra, lifted his baton, and struck up another tune. The orchestra played joyfully. The couples resumed their jubilant dance.

“Are you sure you don’t wish to join them?” the boatman asked, already knowing that his question deserved no reply.

“You have already seen three cities,” the boatman said to me. “The next place we will visit is the fourth and last city.”

I had no idea what to expect. When, after going downriver for some distance, the boatman guided the boat once again to the shore, I was surprised to see a medieval town, with a cathedral in the center of it. Coming out of the cathedral was a group of monks in hairshirts, wearing leg irons and shuffling in procession, chanting and singing hymns as they went. Their faces were drawn and tired, their heads bowed down in sorrow.

Suddenly the procession came to a halt. There was a moment of silence. The monks began chanting something in a very loud voice. The moment they finished chanting, they stripped off their hairshirts. It was only then that I noticed they were holding scourges. The thongs were tipped with sharp blades of metal. A great cry went up from the monks as they began flagellating themselves. The spikes went deep into their skin. With each stroke bright red lines appeared on their naked bodies.

They were wailing all at once. Despite their anguished faces, it was nonetheless clear that their shouts were songs of praise. Occasionally a snatch of words would rise above the din. “Our souls have been pacified.” “We have finally found peace.” “My spirit has been calmed.”

Suddenly there appeared in the sky a host of angels. When the monks saw them, they fell to their knees in awe and worshipped. The angels were crying. Their tears fell down from heaven, trickling over the monks’ cuts and bruises.

As the weeping continued, one of the monks stepped forward and approached the boat, moving as quickly as his leg irons permitted.

“I see that you have brought him,” the monk said, addressing the boatman.

“Just as you requested,” the boatman replied.

Looking at me, the monk said, “What is your impression of the cities you have visited? Would you like to live in any of them?”

“No, never,” I answered.

“Then stay here with us.”

“I do not wish to dwell here either.”

“Follow me,” the monk said.

“No, I will not follow you.”

“But I offer you freedom,” the monk said. “Freedom from old age, disease, and death. You will finally find salvation.”

“I do not wish to be saved.” Then turning to the boatman I said, “Please take me away from here. Take me back to the dock where I first met you.”

“We cannot go back,” the boatman said. “Perhaps you haven’t noticed, but this boat has no oars.”

And the current is simply too strong for us to return upstream.”

“But you must take me back,” I cried, getting up to shake the man by the collar.

The boatman was unruffled. “No, the only way is forward.”

“We are not like these monks,” I said, tightening my hand on his collar. “We wear no chains. If we are truly free, then we can go wherever we want.”

“Ah,” the boatman said with a smile. “But we are not truly free.”

I let go of his collar and sat back down in the bow of the boat, putting my head between my knees. I regretted that I ever gotten into this boat. But I could not go back and change my decision.

“Don’t be so dejected,” the boatman said. “There is one more place I would like to take you. It may give you hope.”

“Another city? I thought you said that the city we just saw was the last.”

“The place we are going to next is not a city.”

“Then where are we going?”

“To the opposite shore.”

“And what will we find there?”

“I’m afraid there are no words to describe it.”

As the boat made its way over the black waters towards to the other shore, the stars fell from the sky. The moon was extinguished. We rode in darkness, unable to see anything before us. Finally the boatman said, “Here we are.” But it was just a voice. The boatman himself had disappeared.

“I can’t see anything,” I told the voice. “Are you still there? I can’t see you. I can’t even see myself!”

“There is nothing for you to see,” the voice replied.

How can I describe the landscape that lay before me? A description requires something to be described, but on the opposite shore there was nothing. Absolutely nothing. It could not be called a desert or a wilderness, but the land—it could not even be called land, of course, but what other word should I use?—was totally empty, with neither contours nor any distinguishing features.

I still could not see the boatman but I could hear his breathing. Finally his voice said, “We are home.”

“What is home?” I asked.

“A place in which nothing exists, and for that very reason a place in which everything is possible.”

“But surely we exist,” I said. “I can still hear your voice, even if I can’t see you.”

“Here on the edge of nothingness, things happen but there are no things.”

“How can that be?” I asked.

“You yourself are not a thing but an event. You should have known that all along. What we call ‘existence’ is nothing but an illusion.”

I reached down to touch my leg but found only air. I tried to tap my forehead, but my invisible hand went right through it.

The voice continued, “Once you step out of this boat into nothingness, even these events will disappear.”

“So, you’re telling me to get out of the boat.”

“No, as always you have a choice. You can jump across to the shore of nothingness if you like or you can return to the cities on the opposite shore, where people grow old but never die, where people suffer but feel no pain, where people continue living even though they are dead, where people think they are free when they are in fact in chains.”

“I do not wish to return,” I said.

“A wise decision,” the voice replied. “Here you will no longer exist. You will be beyond both life and death. This is the nothingness out of which you were born and the nothingness to which you will return.”

“If I stay here, will it be forever?” I asked.

“There is no forever,” he voice replied. “Space is simply the distance between two points and time is nothing more than one event following another. Once there are no longer any points, there is no space. Once there are no longer any events, eternity itself ceases to exist.”

“So, what would I do in such a place?”

“There is nothing for you to do.”

“Sounds boring!” I said.

The voice laughed. “No, you would not be bored. Boredom is only the absence of things and

events. But if there is nothing to begin with, then there is nothing to miss and no one to miss them.”

“And if I return to the opposite shore?”

“You will join the others in their suffering. You will regret that you ever left this place.”

I pondered what the boatman had told me.

“Then I shall go back,” I said finally.

“There is no reason for you return,” the voice replied.

“Is it not better to affirm life with all its suffering than to run away from it?”

“But the lands lie on two completely different sides of the river.”

“I will build a boat and cross the river in it.”

“There is nothing for you to build a boat with. Besides, you would not know the way. There is no one to guide you.”

“Then I will build a boat out of nothingness and find the way myself,” I said.

“And if you succeed, you would most likely stay on the opposite shore forever, just like the others.”

“No, I shall return someday, but not until everyone on the other side can join me.”

“Ha!” the boatman cried. “Who do you think would join you?”

“Do not the others wish to come here, too?”

“As you have seen, they are too preoccupied with their own pursuits. They are unable even to imagine a place such as this, let alone want to come here. It’s beyond their comprehension.”

“But what if I were to go there and tell them about this place, wouldn’t they want to come then?”

“They would not listen to you. Even if you shout it from the highest mountain, over the hills and everywhere, no one would pay any attention.”

“I will compel them to come.”

“They cannot be compelled,” the voice said. “No one can be forced to come here against their own will.”

“I will lead them here.”

“No one would follow.”

“I will ferry them across the river one by one.”

“They will not get into your boat.”

“Then I will simply point the way to them.”

“Each must find their own way.”

“How will they know the way?”

“They won’t.”

“Why not?” I asked.

“Because there is no way.”

I was beginning to lose my confidence.

“So what can I do?”

“There is nothing you can do.”

“But surely there must be something!”

The voice was compassionate. “I understand how you feel, but even this desire must be overcome. Eternity itself is too short for you to accomplish the task you have set for yourself. That is why they will remain on the opposite shore for eons and why you will also remain there for eons if you go back and try to help them.”

“Very well,” I said. I stood up in the boat and put one foot over the side. “Then I shall enter this land of nothingness.”

“I understand perfectly,” the voice said. “It’s really the best choice.”

But then I reconsidered. The cities I had visited were identical to the cities in my dream, the same dream I’d had before leaving my father’s house.

After a few more moments of reflection I said, “No, I shall return to the other shore after all. However difficult it may be to find my way back to this land of nothingness, I will find it. However innumerable the people I must help, I will help them. And however long it takes, I will not rest a moment until the deed is accomplished.”

“You would renounce heaven to return to hell?”

“Yes,” I said. “Please take me there.”

“No, you must return alone,” the voice replied.

“But how shall I get there?”

“Here. The boat is yours. I have been ferrying people from that other shore to this one for longer

than you can even imagine. You are the first person who has agreed to come with me all the way to the end of the journey and not leap into the void. Finally I have found someone who can take my place. I am getting off.”

The boat rocked. I heard a splash of water. And then nothing.

I sat down in the stern of the boat, placed my hand on the rudder, and steered the boat back into the river towards the opposite shore. As the boat moved from darkness into light, my own body gradually became visible again.