

The Buddha Bowl

**A Great Story Parable in the Zen Tradition,
Honoring the creation of atoms inside ancestral stars**

**by Paula Hirschboeck
script version adapted by Connie Barlow**

www.TheGreatStory.org

Roles for Narrator, Nun Fu, Emperor Wu, and Teacher

Note to facilitator: Invite volunteers to act out their parts while reading from their script. Volunteers need strong voices. If there is one microphone, have the narrator use it. You may wish to read the narrator role (pausing when necessary for actors to follow along), if you have a strong voice. Nun Fu is on stage the whole time. Emperor Wu is also a lead actor. The Teacher has just a minor part. (You may wish to distribute the scripts to volunteers before lunch or before a break; but that isn't necessary.)

Tell audience that a number of Great Story parables, including this one, can be downloaded for free from www.TheGreatStory.org. This one was written by Paula Hirschboeck, a professor of philosophy and environmental studies at Edgewood, a Dominican Liberal Arts School in Madison, WI, where she also serves as a Zen Buddhist chaplain.

- Explain what Great Story parables are. See: www.thegreatstory.org/parables.html).
- Make sure that you have already presented the scientific grounding of how the chemical elements in us and Earth were all (except hydrogen) created inside ancestral stars that lived and died before our sun was born. See: www.thegreatstory.org/Stardustbackground.pdf).

You may also wish to ensure that listeners are familiar with the three core Buddhist teachings: "I take refuge in the Buddha. I take refuge

in the Dharma. I take refuge in the Sangha.” (Because the climax of the parable speaks about “taking refuge in the Great Self.”)

Narrator role for "The Buddha Bowl"

Note to Narrator: Stand or sit at the center back of "stage" while the actors act in front of you. Read what is in bold here. Keep track of the action to pace your reading. Because all you do is read, not act, take responsibility for the successful flow of the play. If an actor is unaware it is their turn to speak, prompt them. If they seem to have missed a behavior you are reading, repeat the phrase, and so on. This is a serious play, but be sure to have fun. Mistakes are perfectly okay.

Begin after Nun Fu and Emperor Wu are standing on the stage.

NARRATOR: "Once upon a time, there was a mighty emperor. Emperor Wu had an ancient treasure that he valued above all his many possessions. This was a bowl made from the skull of a revered Buddhist master. Whenever Emperor Wu drank tea from the delicate polished skull, he felt at one with the wisdom of the ages."

EMPEROR WU: "Ahhhhhhh!"

NARRATOR: "This special bowl became his "Buddha Bowl." One day a nun from the nearby monastery was serving the emperor his tea. Nun Fu was a rather dreamy Buddhist nun. On this particular day, while pouring tea, she spilled a few drops on the emperor's hand."

EMPEROR: "Aaargh!"

NARRATOR: "The hot liquid burned. The bowl fell from the Emperor's hands, shattering into numberless pieces. Fu stared at the white bone bits on the black stone floor. Then she became strangely calm, entranced by the sight."

NUN FU: "Like stars strewn through the night."

NARRATOR: "Then she heard Emperor Wu shouting."

EMPEROR WU: "My precious Buddha bowl, gone, because of your clumsiness!"

NARRATOR: "Fu looked up and met the emperor's angry gaze."

EMPEROR WU: "You must find me another or I will have YOUR skull, Nun Fu!"

NARRATOR: "Emperor Wu kicked aside the bits of broken skull, and then stormed out. Fu quietly returned to her monastery. There, she approached her teacher's door and knocked three times as prescribed."

TEACHER: "Enter."

NARRATOR: "Nun Fu entered, and bowed before her teacher. Nun Fu then told of her predicament. [pause] When she finished speaking, the two nuns bowed to one another and entered into silence. Then the teacher spoke a koan for Fu."

TEACHER: FIND YOUR GREAT SELF.
THE BUDDHA BOWL OF THE STARS
SHALL APPEAR FOR YOU TO USE AT WILL."

NARRATOR: "Fu bowed and left. The koan rang in her ears."

NUN FU: "Find your great self. The Buddha Bowl of the stars shall appear for you to use at will. . . Find your great self. The Buddha Bowl of the stars shall appear for you to use at will."

NARRATOR: "As Nun Fu repeated the koan, the words echoed within her skull. They reverberated through her bones.

The Emperor's official tea ceremony was to be held at the next full moon, almost two weeks away. When Fu went into the monastery garden that first evening, she saw the white sliver of the new moon appear in the west as the sun was setting. She stayed in the garden long into the night, gazing at the stars, while turning the simple words of her teacher over and over in her mind. Each evening for the next twelve days, Fu went into the garden, where she watched the stars appear while breathing her koan into her very bones.

By day Nun Fu was assigned to work in the little Zen garden. There she raked patterns into the sand around the carefully placed rocks. Sunlight glinted off the myriad bits of quartz — of silica — at her feet. Suddenly, while looking at the stones at her feet, she paused her raking and exclaimed . . ."

NUN FU: "Daytime stars! All around me, daytime stars!"

NARRATOR: Each evening Fu watched the night-time stars appear and scatter themselves into deep space. Breathing in the dark, meditating without end, she surrendered herself to the koan. The simple words were taking her deeper and deeper into the emptiness of space, to the time before the light of stars was born.

NUN FU: "Body and mind dropping off into astonishing Radiance... Everything arising together out of that Radiance... The Starburst breaking open the wonder of the Universe."

NARRATOR: "Fu herself became this Vastness. She became Vastness watching Itself unfold. Fu was light and air and water and earth. She *became* the Universe of stones and bones, of sunshine and sand. . .[pause]

The days and nights pass. It is now full moon day. Fu prepares for meeting the Emperor by shaving her head. [pause]

Fu softly touches her smooth round skull. One final time, she speaks her koan."

NUN FU: "Find your Great Self. The Buddha Bowl of the stars shall appear for you to use at will."

NARRATOR: "The sun is now setting. It is time for Nun Fu to return to Emperor Wu's palace and prepare for the tea ceremony. [pause while Fu exits stage]

Emperor Wu comes to the tea ceremony wearing his finest silks.

The Emperor welcomes his noble guests. Then he holds out his hand, waiting for the new Buddha Bowl to be placed upon it.

Nun Fu appears at the entrance with one hand clenched at her belly, keeping her head bowed. With small steps, she approaches the Emperor, coming to stand before him. The room is silent, tense. Everyone is waiting. Suddenly she flings open her fingers. Sand scatters across the floor. At that moment the light of the full moon shines through the eastern window onto the black stone floor. The sand glistens as brightly as stars in the night sky.

Fu rises to her full height, and looks straight into the Emperor's eyes. A power — the power of her

Great Self — seems to flow through her. And she speaks:”

NUN FU: “Receive the Buddha Bowl of the stars. Know it as your very Self. Star, Sand, Stone, Bone — All take refuge in the one Being of the Universe. Will YOU take refuge in the Great Self which is not separate, but is one?”

NARRATOR: Fu bows very deeply, and hears the rustle of silk before her. [pause for Emperor to go to Fu and begin serving *her* tea.] **When she finally rises, Emperor Wu is standing there, serving HER a bowl of tea.**

NARRATOR: [*Join the actors in bowing to audience.*]

The Buddha Bowl

A Great Story Parable

NUN FU role (a Buddhist nun)

NUN FU: Your part is all marked in **BOLD** type. *Remember to read loud enough for all to hear. Even though you are interacting with Emperor (and, later, with Teacher), remember to often turn your head toward the audience while speaking. Relax and enjoy. If you lose your way, the narrator will prompt you. Mistakes are to be expected! You actually have very little to say. Mostly, you are acting out what the narrator says you are doing. So when you see a long section with no bold, stop looking at your script and just ACT how the narrator says you are acting.*

***BEGIN** by standing on stage facing Emperor Wu, about five feet apart, side to the audience.*

NARRATOR: Once upon a time . . .

EMPEROR WU: [*drinking tea from bowl*] "Ahhhhhhh!"

NARRATOR: This special bowl became his "Buddha Bowl." One day a nun from the nearby monastery was serving the emperor his tea.

NUN FU: [***Bow, step toward the Emperor, bow again, and prepare to serve him tea.***]

NARRATOR: Nun Fu was a rather dreamy Buddhist nun. On this particular day, while pouring tea, she spilled a few drops on the emperor's hand.

NUN FU: [***Spill tea; look horrified at floor***]

EMPEROR: "Aaargh!"

NARRATOR: The hot liquid burned. The bowl fell from the Emperor's hands, shattering into numberless pieces. Fu stared at the white bone bits on the black stone floor. Then she became strangely calm, entranced by the sight.

NUN FU: [*calmly, to oneself, while WAVING ARM toward broken bits on floor*] **"Like stars strewn through the night sky."**

NARRATOR: Then she heard Emperor Wu shouting.

EMPEROR WU: "My precious Buddha bowl, gone, because of your clumsiness!"

NARRATOR: Fu looked up and met the emperor's angry gaze.

EMPEROR WU: "You must find me another or I will have YOUR skull, Nun Fu!"

NARRATOR: Emperor Wu kicked aside the bits of broken skull, and then stormed out.

NUN FU: [***Circle away, and then come toward teacher, who has just entered stage.***]

NARRATOR: Fu quietly returned to her monastery. She approached her teacher's door, and knocked three times as prescribed.

NUN FU: [***Knock 3 times.***]

TEACHER: "Enter."

NARRATOR: Nun Fu entered, and bowed before her teacher.

NUN FU: [*Enter humbly, bow, and begin mouthing and softly gesturing as if you are explaining your predicament.*]

NARRATOR: Nun Fu told of her predicament. When she finished speaking, the two nuns bowed to one another and entered into silence. Then the teacher spoke a koan for Fu:

TEACHER: "FIND YOUR GREAT SELF.
THE BUDDHA BOWL OF THE STARS [*point upward*]
SHALL APPEAR FOR YOU TO USE AT WILL."

NARRATOR: Fu bowed and left. The koan rang in her ears.

NUN FU: [*Walk slowly in circles, repeating to self:*] "**Find your great self. The Buddha Bowl of the stars shall appear for you to use at will. . . . Find your great self. The Buddha Bowl of the stars shall appear for you to use at will.**" [*Keep concentrating and circling, and move your mouth and gesture hands as if you are still repeating the koan.*]

NARRATOR: As Nun Fu repeated the koan, the words echoed within her skull. They reverberated through her bones.

NUN FU: [*Walk away again and return, now at monastery garden. Stop looking at script, and just do what you hear narrator saying you do.*]

NARRATOR: The Emperor's official tea ceremony was to be held at the next full moon, almost two weeks away. When Fu went into the monastery garden that first evening, she saw the white sliver of the new moon appear in the west as the sun was setting. She stayed in the garden long into the night, gazing at the stars, while turning the simple words of her teacher over and over in her mind.

Each evening for the next twelve days, Fu went into the garden, where she watched the stars appear while breathing her koan into her very bones.

By day Nun Fu was assigned to work in the little Zen garden. There she raked patterns into the sand around the carefully placed rocks. Sunlight glinted off the myriad bits of at her feet. Suddenly, while looking at the stones at her feet, she paused her raking and exclaimed . . .

NUN FU: [*look down and sweep hand*] **"Daytime stars! All around me, daytime stars!"** [*Do what narrator says.*]

NARRATOR: Each evening Fu watched the night-time stars appear and scatter themselves into deep space. Breathing in the dark, meditating without end, she surrendered herself to the koan. The simple words were taking her deeper and deeper into the emptiness of space, to the time before the light of stars was born.

NUN FU: [*Speak slowly, looking up at sky as often as you can, holding one arm skyward.*]

"Body and mind dropping off into astonishing Radiance...

Everything arising together out of that Radiance...

The Starburst breaking open the wonder of the Universe..."

NUN FU: [*face audience, close eyes, and swoon into reverie as narrator speaks, then do what narrator says.*]

NARRATOR: Fu herself became this Vastness. She became Vastness watching Itself unfold. Fu was light and air and water and earth. She became the Universe of stones and bones, of sunshine and sand.

The days and nights pass. It is now full moon day. Fu prepares for meeting the Emperor by shaving her head.

Fu softly touched her smooth round skull. One final time, she speaks her koan:

NUN FU: "Find your Great Self. The Buddha Bowl of the stars shall appear for you to use at will." [go to edge of stage; listen carefully to narrator for how to act for rest of play; for you have only one more line to speak, but a lot of acting to do. Use your script only to read that line.]

NARRATOR: "The sun is now setting. It is time for Nun Fu to return to Emperor Wu's palace and prepare for the tea ceremony.

Emperor Wu comes to the tea ceremony wearing his finest silks.

The Emperor welcomes his noble guests. Then he holds out his hand, waiting for the new Buddha Bowl to be placed upon it.

Nun Fu appears at the entrance with one hand clenched at her belly, keeping her head bowed. With small steps, she approaches the Emperor, coming to stand before him. The room is silent, tense. Everyone is waiting. Suddenly she flings open her fingers. Sand scatters across the floor. At that moment the light of the full moon shines through the eastern window onto the black stone floor. The sand glistens as brightly as stars in the night sky.

Fu rises to her full height, and looks straight into the Emperor's eyes. A power — the power of her Great Self — seems to flow through her. And she speaks:"

NUN FU: "Receive the Buddha Bowl of the stars. Know it as your very Self. Star, Sand, Stone, Bone: all take refuge in the one Being of the Universe. Will YOU take refuge in the Great Self which is not separate, but is one?"

NARRATOR: Fu bows very deeply, and hears the rustle of silk before her. When she finally rises, Emperor Wu is standing there, serving HER a bowl of tea.

NUN FU: [*Rise from your low bow, receive tea from Emperor, then bow slightly again.*]

[The end. All characters bow to audience.]

The Buddha Bowl

A Great Story Parable

EMPEROR WU role

EMPEROR WU: Your part is all marked in BOLD type.

Remember to read loud enough for all to hear. Relax and enjoy. If you lose your way, the narrator will prompt you. Mistakes are to be expected!

You actually have very little to say. You are on at the beginning and then again at the end. In between, you can take a seat off-stage.

Even when on-stage, you are mostly acting out what the narrator says you are doing.

BEGIN by standing on stage facing Emperor Wu, about five feet apart, side to the audience.

NARRATOR: Once upon a time, there was a mighty emperor. Emperor Wu had an ancient treasure that he valued above all his many possessions. This was a bowl made from the skull of a revered Buddhist master. Whenever Emperor Wu drank tea from the delicate polished skull, he felt at one with the wisdom of the ages.

EMPEROR WU: [*drinking tea from bowl*] **"Ahhhhhhh!"**

NARRATOR: This special bowl became his "Buddha Bowl." One day a nun from the nearby monastery was serving the emperor his tea. Nun Fu was a rather dreamy Buddhist nun. On this particular day, while pouring tea, she spilled a few drops on the emperor's hand.

EMPEROR: [*recoil burnt hand, drop bowl*] **"Aaargh!"**

NARRATOR: The hot liquid burned. The bowl fell from the Emperor's hands, shattering into numberless pieces. Fu stared at the white bone bits on the black stone floor. Then she became strangely calm, entranced by the sight.

NUN FU: "Like stars strewn through the night."

NARRATOR: Then she heard Emperor Wu shouting.

EMPEROR WU: [*point angrily at Nun Fu:*] **"My precious Buddha bowl, gone, because of your clumsiness!"**

NARRATOR: Fu looked up and met the emperor's angry gaze.

EMPEROR WU: **"You must find me another or I will have YOUR skull, Nun Fu!"** [*Now, KICK at the broken bits of skull, then angrily LEAVE the stage*]

EMPEROR WU (offstage): [*A LONG PART OF THE SCRIPT CONTINUES HERE WITHOUT YOU, SO SIT DOWN, AND THEN START TO GET READY TO RETURN TO STAGE WHEN NUN FU SHAVES HER HEAD. SKIM BELOW AND NOTICE THAT YOU CAN ENTER STAGE THIS FINAL TIME WITHOUT YOUR SCRIPT, BECAUSE YOU SAY NOTHING. YOU SIMPLY ACT AS THE NARRATOR DESCRIBES YOUR ACTING. Note that at the very end, you are deferentially serving Nun Fu a bowl of tea.*]

LAST PART WHERE THE EMPEROR ENTERS:

NARRATOR: "The sun is now setting. It is time for Nun Fu to return to Emperor Wu's palace and prepare for the tea ceremony.

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The Emperor welcomes his noble guests. Then he holds out his hand, waiting for the new Buddha Bowl to be placed upon it.

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NUN FU: "Receive the Buddha Bowl of the stars. Know it as your very Self. Star, Sand, Stone, Bone — All take refuge in the one Being of the Universe. Will YOU take refuge in the Great Self which is not separate, but is one?"

NARRATOR: Fu bows very deeply, and hears the rustle of silk before her. When she finally rises, Emperor Wu is standing there, serving HER a bowl of tea.

EMPEROR WU: [*Bow to one another, then in unison to audience.*]

The Buddha Bowl

A Great Story Parable

ZEN TEACHER role

TEACHER: Your part is all marked in BOLD type.

Remember to read loud enough for all to hear. Because you have only a short dialogue with nun Fu about 1/4 of the way through the play, begin by sitting in a chair alongside the stage, and then exit to that chair to watch the remainder of the play.

When you eventually enter the stage, stand with your side to audience, waiting for Fu to knock on your door. Even though you are speaking to Fu, you may wish to turn your head toward audience occasionally so they can see you saying the words, and so they can best hear you.

You will know to enter the stage when you hear this happening:

EMPEROR WU: "You must find me another or I will have YOUR skull, Nun Fu!"

NARRATOR: Emperor Wu kicked aside the bits of broken skull, and then stormed out.

TEACHER: *[Enter stage, as the Emperor exits.]*

NARRATOR: Fu quietly returned to her monastery. She approached her teacher's door, and knocked three times as prescribed.

TEACHER: "Enter, my child." *[When Fu enters and bows, bow your head too, then gesture softly for her to speak.]*

NARRATOR: Nun Fu entered, and bowed before her teacher.

NARRATOR: Nun Fu told of her predicament. When she finished speaking, the two nuns bowed to one another and entered into silence.

TEACHER: [*Bow to Fu*]

NARRATOR: Then the teacher spoke a koan for Fu:

TEACHER: [*slowly*] “Find your Great Self. The Buddha Bowl of the Stars [*point upward*] shall appear for you to use at will.”

TEACHER: [*Bow again. Nun Fu will turn and leave, and you return to your seat.*]

TEACHER: [*At end of play, return to stage to bow with other actors for audience applause.*]