

Sand Castles

by Betty Bland

Children and adults can while away many hours, build sand castles, as they enjoy the lapping waves and warm sands on the seashore. A small child might begin, awkwardly, by filling up a bucket, packing the sand tightly, and then inverting it to create a magical, flat-topped volcano, standing prominently above the surrounding sand.

Over time, the child begins to imagine more complex creations: mountains, castles, roads and tunnels. Sometimes interesting shells, toy cars and action figures are added to enhance the growing fortress.

But eventually a stray animal or person comes running through, knocking the masterpiece helter-skelter, or the incoming tide overreaches the water's former bounds and begins to dissolve it. At first, the child may be disturbed that anything might tamper with such a work of art, but soon must come to terms with its impermanence. As part of the learning process, and perhaps as an expression of frustration with a fickle universe, the child might begin tearing down the sand creations, even before they are finished.

Children grow through frustration, through creativity, and through the rebuilding process. Gradually they become better sand castle builders. It doesn't matter if a wave washes everything away; it can always be rebuilt. Over time, the growing person incorporates the skills until the sand castle always exists within potentiality – just waiting for the right sunny day at the beach.

In our daily lives, we are constantly encountering situations in which we must learn a new skill. As the skill develops, we create something – a house decorated, a picture painted, a paper written, or computer software designed. Each thing we do, although it may begin faltering, becomes a matter of pride and attachment, as we delve into the creative process. After investing so much in its formation, we slip easily into feelings of ownership and attachment to its permanence. As the Buddha said, clinging to the permanence of anything in this impermanent world causes a great deal of pain.

My work as a supervising systems analyst in state government with mainframe computer systems particularly brought this to my attention. Sometimes we would spend weeks or even months on a particular project, and just when it was really coming together, the entire definition of what we were trying to accomplish would change in the twinkling of an eye. This could happen for many reasons – changes in funding, in politics – but the fact was that a huge wave had washed over our machinations and we felt crushed. There were many things we could still be thankful for, of course – we still had our health, our pay cheques, our families – but, at that moment, those didn't count. The team members were caught up in attachment to our investment in time, energy and creativity. At such times, it was helpful to take a step back and look at the bigger picture. I realised that it was much like a sand castle at the beach. Everything will change, and the tighter we hold on, the faster it will crumble.

But something can always be gained in the process that can never be taken away: our own inner resources and strengths. We develop the ability to build better sand castles. Whenever we apply

ourselves fully to a task, no matter how the end product may turn out, we will have gained powers of concentration and greater skills.

If we apply ourselves to kindness and service, that too becomes a part of our inner tool chest. This is what Jesus meant when he said, “store up treasure in heaven, where neither moth nor rust will destroy, nor thieves break in and steal.” The great treasures that we are storing are tendencies and qualities of being – built by the ordinary days of our lives well-lived.

Hindu philosophy calls these bundles of characteristics *skandhas*, those tendencies that are carried over from lifetime to lifetime, and very much a part of the mechanism through which karmic predicaments are met. The skandhas become treasures, as they are gradually transformed through our efforts in conscientious living.

The waves of time are not able to destroy the beauty of skill in action, single-minded commitment to the betterment of humanity, and a loving heart. These will continue as lasting treasures – the sand castles stored within us.