

Catherine Diamond

The Philosopher's Plastic Stone

The Philosopher's Plastic Stone is an adaptation of the Burmese folktale "Why There Are so Many Pagodas at Pagan," in *Burmese Folktales* by Maung Htin Aung, (Oxford UP, 1959). It combines that story's main character, the bizarre Monk Goat-Bull, with the Greek King Midas, as well as the Burmese alchemist, Zawgyi, to address the relatively new problem of plastic rubbish in Myanmar.

Cast:

Monk Goat-bull
Assistant
Tax Payer 1
Tax Payer 2
Tax Payer 3
King
Prince
Princess

Scene I

(Outside the Monk's laboratory; the Tax Payers are planted in the audience)

Tax Payer 1:
(shouts toward the stage) No more of our money.

Tax Payer 2:
For seven years he's been wasting it.

Tax Payer 3:
We pay and pay, and yet the royal treasury is still empty.

Tax Payer 1:
That's because he is a *special* alchemist—he turns our gold into nothing.

Tax Payer 3:
Even the king is getting fed up.

Tax Payer 2:
Don't listen to any more of his promises. Throw him out. *(they chant 'Throw him out')*

Monk:
(inside his laboratory on stage) Fools. I've finished studying the ancient manuscripts and followed every instruction perfectly. I must persuade the King to give me one last bit of cash to finish. *(goes to the King on throne)*

Monk:

(in the Palace) Your Majesty, you have faithfully supported me all these years. Now I have reached the final stage and success is in sight. Do not forsake me now.

King:

I've emptied the royal treasury for you and now the people are angry. I have nothing more to give.

Monk:

Sir, that ring there on your finger...?

King:

My dead wife's ring! I can't part with it.

Monk:

My last request!

King:

(gives him the ring) My last jewel. You know now what will happen if you are not successful.

Monk:

I will be. I have to be. *(goes back home)* Now read me the last instructions again.

Assistant:

"Put the lump of metal in acid, and it will at last be The Philosopher's Stone."

Monk:

Are you sure it says '*acid?*' Does it say for how long?

Assistant:

Yes...no.

Monk:

(They put it in the acid and smoke comes out.) Anything?

Assistant:

No. *(They wait, growing sound of angry people outside.)*

Monk:

Look again.

Assistant:

No. *(They wait; the sound of angry people gets louder.)*

Monk:

Let me look! Damn! Nothing's happening. I can't fail. *(He goes to the people; they shake their fists, and he runs back in.)* They'll tear me apart. I should have worked on becoming invisible.

Tax Payer 1:

There he is! The fraud has been cheating the king all along.

Tax Payer 2:

He doesn't fool us. He's taken our money and put it in a foreign bank account.

Tax Payer 3:

But he won't escape. We're coming to get you, you fraud, and getting our money back.

Monk:

My fellow citizens, I have deprived myself of food and sleep...

Assistant:

And me, too.

Monk:

Working my fingers to the bone...

Assistant:

Mine, too.

Monk:

Following the ancient texts to make our country the richest on earth....

Assistant:

And me, too.

Monk:

Just be patient a little bit longer.

Assistant:

And you, too. (*Monk hits him*)

Monk:

Take another look, fool. Any change?

Assistant:

(*He shakes his head*) You've failed.

Monk:

And you, too. (*He hits him*) I'll have to report to the King. (*He goes to Palace.*)

King:

(*in Palace, King sees him and turns away*) Don't tell me.

Monk:

It's a worst case scenario.

Tax Payer 2:

We demand immediate execution.

Tax Payer 3:

We demand immediate repayment.

Tax Payer 1:

We demand a new king who won't be so easily fooled by imposters.

Tax Payer 3:

Or so greedy.

King:

Alas, my people, I did it to make us all prosperous.

Tax Payer 1:

But the Philosopher's Stone is a fairy tale. No one believes it anymore. The road to prosperity is not magic but proper planning and hard work. You fooled yourself but not us. You must punish him, and step down.

King:

Yes, I must, I must, I must. *(to himself)* But what can I do?

Monk:

(to himself) It's my fault. I've put the king in this position. All right you people, look and never forget. *(He turns his back and puts out his eyes.)* Are you satisfied?

Tax Payers:

(all gasp) Yes, yes We won't demand any more.

Monk:

Where's my assistant now that I really need him? *(grabs him)* Let's go home. Throw that stone of shit into the latrine where it belongs. And let's go to sleep.

Assistant:

(He throws the stone in a hole) May my shit turn to gold! *(He drinks, sound of owl or night bird; Assistant is drunk, gets up at night and goes to use the latrine. He sees light from hole and jumps back)* Master, master, the latrine is on fire.

Monk:

What! What, I can't see a thing. Run to the market and buy a pair of animal eyes.

Assistant:

(he returns) Here. I could only get one eye from a bull and one eye from a goat.

Monk:

What a ridiculous fate! Now I will be known as 'Monk Goat Bull.' Give me the stone. Wash it, first, you fool. *(He puts in the eyes, touches them with the stone and he can see. Then he hits his Assistant.)* You must have read the instructions wrong. Hmm, it says 'acid' but it must have meant 'pee.'

Assistant:

That makes sense. *(Monk hits him)* It doesn't look like gold.

Monk:

No, of course not. It *makes* gold, not *is* gold.

Assistant:

It doesn't even look like a stone any more.

Monk:

You're right, but it must be magic because it cured my eyes. Let's go to the king.

Monk:

(in the Palace) Your Majesty, look, the stone cured my eyes.

King:

Indeed. But they're very strange. I don't like looking at them. Can you really see?

Monk:

Yes, perfectly. Tell the people to bring out their pots, clay or metal and baskets. The stone will turn all into gold.

King:

Excellent. I knew you wouldn't fail.

Monk:

(Tax Payers each bring a pot) Now, you people of little faith, be silent and behold. Your Majesty, I saved your ring—now it will become the purest of gold. *(Everything turns into plastic)*

Tax Payer 1:

Hey, it's not gold! Now you've ruined my pot. *(She hits monk with plastic pot)*

Tax Payer 2:

What have you done with my basket? *(She hits monk with plastic basin)*

Tax Payer 3:

You're not just a fraud, but the most shameless fraud we've ever seen. *(She hits him.)*

Monk:

My assistant is playing a trick on me. *(He hits assistant who turns to plastic.)*

King:

You completely disappoint me. Don't ever come back again. *(He throws his plastic ring to the ground and goes. Monk picks it up)*

Monk:

I don't understand. What is this? The King's ring, but it's lighter. It looks like glass, but doesn't break. It must be worth something. Hey you, come along. *(goes to Assistant)* What! You don't move? A statue. But so light. *(He carries him off stage)* This is some kind of miracle; too bad I don't know what kind. Ah stone, I'm not enough of a philosopher for you!

Black out.

Scene II

Tax Payer 1:

(Monk returns to laboratory; Tax Payers enter) Master Monk Goat-Bull. I didn't throw my pot away, but filled it with water and carried it home. It holds water well and is much lighter than the old pot.

Tax Payer 2:

And it keeps water out too. The river flooded my house and I was able to float inside my wash basin. We want you to touch other things.

Monk:

Really?

Tax Payer 1:

This old coat. *(He touches it with the stone)* See, now it is a water-proof raincoat. Now these sacks. *(they turn into plastic bags)*. Excellent, now I can buy soup and drinks without messy dripping. Now do my washing basin, too. And everything else. *(They give him many items and all are turned into plastic)*

Monk:

It's not gold.

Tax Payer 3:

It's not as pretty, but more useful. Now I don't have to spend my time weaving baskets from reeds, making pots and bowls from clay or packing food in banana leaves. This new stuff is more clean and convenient. I want it for everything.

Monk:

And cheap too, as long as I don't charge for touching with my stone.

Tax Payer 1:

Well, everyone has to live. Here's a 500 kyats for your help.

Monk:

Keep it. *(He finally accepts the money)* Tell everyone to come, I will touch anything you want. *(Tax Payers hurry away)* Oh, what pretty flowers. *(He picks flowers)* Ouch! What? They've changed. They still look like flowers, but don't smell, don't feel the same. Perhaps they won't die either! Why, this is wonderful stuff—it'll last forever. I've found the secret to eternal life, and eternal youth. Oh blessed stone, you are better than gold! *(He kisses stone)* I will touch everything! Flowers that don't need water and stay in bloom forever. Bring all your things—I will touch all. *(People line up with lots of things)*

King:

Yes, yes, make everything into this marvelous material—it will last forever.

Black out.

Scene III

Monk:

(He's now wearing a minister's hat) Your Majesty, everyone is happy with the new material.

King:

Not everybody. Some are grumbling about being out of work—those who used to make clay pots, and reed baskets. Your magic stuff has replaced the traditional crafts.

Monk:

Yes, but those people are just oldfashioned and need to adapt to the new world. How do like your new throne room? It gleams like gold, and yet cost nearly nothing from the royal treasury. And your new royal barge; it floats wonderfully.

King:

Yes, even my crown sits more lightly on my head and doesn't give me headaches like before. It's all nice, but you know, not quite the same. I have a hard time appreciating it—it seems somehow...fake. I guess I'll get used to it...but I don't like seeing my fruit wrapped in it. You may go. *(monk exits)* Prince!

Prince:

(enters) Yes, father.

King:

Disguise yourself and go around the country. Use your eyes and ears to find out what people feel about this new material. Oh! We can't keep calling it 'new material.' We've been using it for 10 years. Doesn't it have a proper name?

Prince:

It's been analyzed as polyurethane, but the common people call it 'plastic.'

King:

I want to know if they are still as in love with it as before.

Prince:

They love it more and more. They use plastic for everything, replacing wood, metal, glass as well as clay. The Monk can't keep up with the demand.

King:

Go investigate. Every good thing has a dark side.

Prince:

(Prince becomes the manipulator of the puppet U Shwe Yoe with a moustache and in this disguise, the puppet questions people). So, are you still happy with plastic? Do you have any complaints?

Tax Payer 2:

All this plastic rubbish is in my fields. Since it clogs up my irrigation and drainage system, the rice rots.

Tax Payer 3:

All this plastic rubbish in the rivers and sea gets caught in my fishing net and sometimes clogs up my motor. The birds and sea animals eat it as seafood and they starve to death. Even baby birds are dying from plastic debris their parents have fed them by mistake.

Tax Payer 1:

All this plastic rubbish clogs the city drains so when it rains, the streets flood.

Prince:

(disguised as U Shwe Yoe) Don't complain! Just collect it and burn it!

Tax Payer 2:

(coughs) Burn it and the smoke poisons the air—perhaps it is returning to shit. We can't breathe.

Tax Payer 1:

The water that sits in it tastes strange too. Especially, if its put in the sun. I don't like it— what do you think? *(gives to Prince to drink from a plastic bottle or container)*

Prince:

If you don't want to burn it, you can bury it.

Tax Payer 3:

We do bury it, but because it lasts forever, it's becoming a pile higher than Mt. Popa.

Prince:

You can dump it at sea.

Tax Payer 2:

We dump it at sea, but now there is a plastic island the size of Myanmar in the middle of the ocean. Plastic lasting forever is a blessing and a curse.

Prince:

You can export the rubbish to another country.

Tax Payer 1:

But other countries are exporting their plastic rubbish to us!

Prince:

You can use it less.

Tax Payers:

(everyone all together) No, no, no! We can't. It is much too cheap and convenient! Even if we wanted to use less, everything is either made with it or wrapped in it, especially in convenience stores.

Black out.

Scene IV

In the Palace.

Monk:

Your Majesty, last night I had a wondrous dream, a plan to restore the temples in Bagan...

King:

Yes?

Monk:

With my new plastic. It can be made into any shape. We can make a clay mold of the ruined sections, and pour in the hot liquid plastic, and when it cools, break the mold and fit it into place. A little plaster over the surface will hide the cracks and can be painted. No one will know what is inside. It will last forever, even in an earthquake it won't break, just bounce.

King:

I don't know. Before I can do any renovation of the temples, I have to consult with UNESCO since Bagan has become a world heritage site.

Prince:

(enters) Father, I have come back to report. The people seem addicted to plastic—they use it for everything. Most of them feel that they now cannot live without it.

Monk:

See, Your Majesty, more valuable than gold!

Prince:

Yes, but they complain about the new problem of plastic rubbish everywhere, especially bags, food wrappings, and plastic bottles. And not just disposable plastic, but even plastic toys, utensils, and e-gadgets. The objects aren't repairable so they're thrown away more readily. Plastic rubbish is causing problems in the countryside and the towns, in the rivers and seaside. We've never had this problem before so we are at a loss at how to solve it.

King:

Monk Goat Bull must solve it. He created it. Go back to your texts.

Monk:

I don't need texts to solve it. I know how—by being king.

King:

How do you dare?

Monk:

Easily. *(grabs the crown)*

Prince:

No, you don't. *(He rushes to the Monk with his sword out)*

Monk:

(laughs) Ha! I am not afraid of your sword! I am not afraid of anything. *(He touches sword with the magic stone and it turns into plastic toy sword.)* You see, you can't hurt me. Now, give me

your throne. *(He takes crown and sits on the throne)* I allow you and the Prince to go to your country palace and live in peace, but the Princess must stay and be my wife.

King:

No, never. She will never agree.

Monk:

She already has.

Prince:

Father, she has bargained to save your life! Let's go now and plot our return. *(exit)*

Monk:

Plastic, my god! I will replace all the gold sculptures in the temples with plastic ones. My royal treasury will be filled with gold again. Princess!

Princess:

(enters) What are you doing on the throne? Where are my father and brother?

Monk:

I am now your king and husband. First kneel and then embrace me.

Princess:

No, never. *(she runs)* Father! Help! *(Monk catches her; his stone accidentally touches her and she turns into plastic)*

Monk:

No! Oh, drat! She's turned into a plastic statue too. That was a bad mistake. Now what to do? Bring me some food. *(to a servant who quickly returns)*

Monk:

(He tries to eat; everything turns to plastic) Drat! plastic smells and tastes horrible. If this keeps up, I'll starve to death. The only person who ever had a good idea was my Assistant. I wonder if there is any way to bring him back to life. *(he drags in Assistant statue back onstage)* Well, Mr. Know-it-all, you should have warned me. What to do? What started it all? The Philosopher's Stone, of course. There, I offer it to you. It is yours. *(he puts stone in front of assistant. Nothing happens)* Not enough. Is that where it really started? No, it started with my greed and quest for power. People have always craved gold, but I replaced it with a craving for convenience! But once accustomed to it, people won't go back to their more troublesome objects. Here, is the king's ring. I give it all up. Now I am just a poor Monk again. *(he picks up his staff)* I am sorry I made you into plastic, you silly boy. Perhaps I should throw **you** in the latrine and see what happens. *(Assistant suddenly twitches)* Oh, you don't like that idea?

Assistant:

No, no Master, don't!

Monk:

You're alive! *(rushes to embrace him, then stops cautiously.)* Well, the celebration can wait. We're in a pickle. Plastic solved a few problems but created many more. How to break the addiction? You're the smart ass—you figure it out.

Assistant:

It was easier being a plastic man. My mother always told me when I had to make a difficult decision to make a list—put all the benefits on one side and all the deficits on the other. So, let's make a list with all the good plastic things on one side and the bad on the other.

Monk:

(they make a list, and get the audience to make suggestions) I think I see a pattern.

Assistant:

Yes, the durable good ones made from plastic can be used for a long time, but they are difficult to dispose of. The use-once-and-throw-away plastic creates the immediate problem of filling every place with toxic rubbish. So, I think we need two solutions.

Monk:

I suggest we meditate on top of Mt Popa. Let's go. *(on Mt. Popa, he digs up roots and makes them into medicine balls, he eats 3 and gives 3 to Assistant.)*

Assistant:

(disgusted) I can't eat these.

Monk:

You must. They will give us the power to meditate.

Assistant:

They look too much like human flesh. I can't eat them.

Monk:

Very well. Meditate without them. But we must summon all our strength, wisdom and faith to solve this problem. *(they meditate, Assistant falls asleep and snores)* See, I knew he needed to eat the medicine balls. Wake up! Well, did you come up with a solution?

Assistant:

Actually, yes. I had a dream that told me we need to use less plastic.

Monk:

You nincompoop! That's no prophecy. Glass and clay are heavy and break; metal is expensive, and wood requires cutting down too many trees, plastic is the best answer and has already replaced them all!

Assistant:

No, we can find something better to replace plastic, bamboo for example, is being used instead of plastic, and even wood. Bamboo grows fast and causes no harm to the environment. Bamboo furniture and floors, even computer casing, bamboo fiber clothes...

Monk:

Not bad, I came to a similar conclusion. Bioplastics can be used for disposable plastic as well. Disposable packaging can be made from compressed rice and corn husks. You can use once and throw away, but it will disappear into the earth and not make mounds of toxic rubbish. Biodegradable substitutes are available; we just need to figure out how to make them without so many chemicals. We have to learn from Nature. In Nature there is no waste, everything is used by somebody and reused by somebody else. The most wonderfully efficient system. I wonder if the King can make a law against waste.

Assistant:

(shakes his head) People will complain. The alternatives are too expensive. People are accustomed to plastic being cheap or free because you just make it from your stone.

Monk:

We still have to support it. I know! We'll tax the plastic and use the money to subsidize the non-plastic. Plastic seems like magic but isn't. It's made from oil and makes us need more and more oil. We have to begin to 'unplastic' our plastic world.

Assistant:

Now, to the really big problem.

Monk:

What is that?!

Assistant:

How are you going to "unplastic" the princess?

Monk:

Hmmm, difficult. How did I unplastic you?

Assistant:

With an apology.

Monk:

Maybe I'll try a kiss with her. My poor princess, this won't hurt a bit. *(kisses her and he turns into a puppet zawgyi manipulated by the Assistant)*

Princess:

Yuck! *(wipes her mouth)* Don't touch me

Assistant:

And so the puppet Monk went again to the top of Mt. Popa where he meditates for a thousand years until his next incarnation. The moral of the story is: Don't let plastic reincarnate into rubbish. Refuse disposable plastic when it's offered to you. Reduce your use of plastic; look for alternatives. Reuse every plastic item until the bitter end. And then Recycle it if you can. The 4 'r's—refuse, reduce, reuse, recycle. *(to the puppet)* Repeat the 4 r's *(the puppet chants 4 R's as a mantra)* Whoops! He dropped his stone. We'll put it here on a pedestal to remember that everything that seems to be too good to be true usually is.

THE END