



Bertolt Brecht's interpretation of "The Buddha's Parable of the Burning House."

Bertolt Brecht's poem, "The Buddha's Parable of the Burning House," relates a parable of the Buddha's, found in the Lotus Sutra, to not fearing the changes which a revolution would involve.

Guatama the Buddha taught
The doctrine of greed's wheel to which we are
bound, and advised
That we shed all craving and thus
Undesiring enter the nothingness that he called
Nirvana.
Then one day his pupils asked him:
"What is it like, this nothingness, Master? Every
one of us would
Shed all craving, as you advise, but tell us
Whether this nothingness which then we shall
enter
Is perhaps like being at one with all creation,
When you lie in water, your body weightless, at
noon,
Unthinking almost, lazily lie in the water, or
drowse
Hardly knowing now that you straighten the
blanket,
Going down fast –whether this nothingness,
then,

Is a happy one of this kind, a pleasant
nothingness, or
Whether this nothingness of yours is more
nothing, cold, senseless and void."
Long the Buddha was silent, then said
nonchalantly:
"There is no answer to your question."
But in the evening, when they had gone,
The Buddha still sat under the bread-fruit tree
and to the others,
To those who had not asked, addressed this
parable:
"Lately I saw a house. It was burning. The flame
Licked at its roof. I went up close and observed
That there were people still inside. I entered the
doorway and called
Out to them that the roof was ablaze, so
exhorting them
To leave at once. But those people
Seemed in no hurry. One of them,
While the heat was already scorching his
eyebrows,
Asked me what it was like outside, whether
there was
Another house for them, and more of this kind.
Without answering
I went out again. These people here, I thought,
Must burn to death before they stop asking
questions.
And truly friends,
Whoever does not yet feel such heat in the
floor that he'll gladly
Exchange it for any other, rather than stay, to
that man
I have nothing to say." So Gautama the Buddha.

*This was published in 1949
in "Kalendergeschichten", a collection of stories and
poems which Brecht had written while in exile during
the war. In English, "Tales from the Calendar,"
translated by Ivonne Kapp and Michael Hamburger,
London: Methuen, 1961.*