

# Buddhist Legends and Stories

## The Love of a Rabbit for a Monk

Long, long time ago, there was a monk and his mother living in a small village temple. As in previous years, the monk was preparing for his autumn retreat journey. His travel belonging included two sets of clothing, one bowl full of rice, a salt bottle, two cups, a pot, a small vase and a knife. All fitted well in a small shoulder sack.

When the day came, the monk waked up early. After a light breakfast, he said farewell to his mother and left with his travel sack. When the monk image became blurred at the far end of the village, the mother closed the temple and started her daily praying. By late afternoon, the monk arrived at his familiar shelter, a small open cave on a hillside facing a spring. Soon after laying down the sack, the monk collected some small dry plants and branches to make a broom and swept the cave. He then went down to the spring and fetched some water. He filled a cup with water and put it on a small flat rock protruding from the cave wall. That was his altar. He put the pot with some water on a small fireplace made with three small rocks. He spread dry thatch on the floor to make a mat and covered it with a long coat. He then went down to the spring again for a quick bath. On the way back, he picked some wild lemon grass leaves. He put them in the boiling pot, and poured water into a cup. That was his evening tea. He sipped the tea slowly. After the tea, he took out another coat, folded it to make a cushion on the mat and sat down for meditation. By midnight, he unfolded the cushion to make a blanket, and lay down on his right side, his face toward the altar. While following his breaths, he went into deep sleep in no time.

Every morning, he waked up when birds started singing. He then broke a small fresh branch of a plant, chewed its end to make a toothbrush and brushed his teeth with salt. He started a day with the morning meditation. When the sun appeared on the hill across the spring, he was preparing his morning tea with some fruit or fresh leaves boiled in water. He then went for alms in the forest. He stopped at wild fruit trees or plants, and collected some ripe fruits such as berry, plum, apple, etc. He also took mushroom or leaves. He came back to his shelter before the sun rose right above his head. He cleaned all the fruits, selected some good ones and put them on the altar. He then began his lunch with the praying for every thing, animals, trees, plants, hills, rivers, etc. to be in harmony and happiness. When the lunch was finished, he put the remaining fruits on a rock in front of the shelter. He then washed his clothes and took a bath in the spring. Once

a week, the monk had a long day praying. On that day, he did not go out for alms, instead he made a bowl of rice soup with some mushroom for lunch.

In the first few years, the monk spent the retreat alone. Two years ago, while the monk was in an evening meditation, a wounded rabbit ran into his shelter. He picked it up. There were several bleeding scratches on its body. He put the pot with some water on the fireplace. He added a spoon of salt. He then gently cleaned the rabbit wound with boiled salty water:

- My poor child! It will hurt but will help your wound.

The rabbit opened its round eyes. The monk could feel its heartbeats.



- Stay here my child. I will be back soon.

He put the rabbit near the fireplace on one of his robe; he stroked its head and left. A moment later, he was back with his mouth chewing some leaves. He put the paste on the wound:

- My child! you will be all right in a few days.

He gave the rabbit some fruits taken from the altar:

- This is for you. Eat it then have a rest. I have to complete my work.

He then sat down, continuing his meditation. When he finished, the rabbit was already in sound sleep. The monk covered the fire with ash. He took a jumper and put on the rabbit, then went to rest.

A few days later, after the wound had healed, the monk let the rabbit go:

- Go out with your friends, my child!

The rabbit left for a distance, then stopped, and looked back with its round blue eyes:

- “Come back here whenever you want,” said the monk.

The rabbit jumped quickly and disappeared in the bush. However, since then it came back every night to stay with the monk.

Soon after the monk starting his eleventh retreat, the very rabbit came to stay with him as in previous years. The rabbit now knew how to sit in meditation with its teacher, but it always felt to sleep well before midnight, and the monk never forgot to cover his pupil with a jumper before going to rest himself. Every morning, the rabbit waked up just when the monk was preparing their breakfast. The teacher took the fruits from the altar, reserved some for the pupil, and put the

rest in the pot with boiling water. He sipped fruit juice slowly, slower than the sun was rising. When the breakfast was completed, the teacher stroked the pupil:

- My child! Another day, be careful!

The rabbit then left while the monk prepared for his daily alms.

Time passed evenly. By mid-autumn, the weather suddenly changed. It had been raining for a whole week. The monk could not go out for alms, and he had used all the rice. Two days ago, there had been a heavy storm. From midnight, rain blowed into every corner of the cave. Toward the morning, the wind calmed down. The monk went out. Many trees had branches broken, some even fell down. Ants, birds, etc. were repairing their nests. The monk did not go for his daily alms, being afraid of stepping on insects, earthworms, etc. However, the rabbit could bring him some plum and berry. Some days later, when the monk could go further in the forest, he learnt that the storm had caused more severe damage than he had expected. The area where he often went for alms was covered with mud. A large area of a hillside had slid down.

The monk became pale and thinner. One night, while they had dinner by the fireplace, the monk said:

- My child, tomorrow I am going back to the village.
- Why teacher? Winter has not come yet!
- But we do not have enough fruits this year.
- I will try to get more.
- It is only enough for you, my child! You are getting thinner and thinner. You need to prepare for the coming winter.
- Do not worry for me teacher! I am all right.
- Furthermore, I feel too weak now.
- Um...

The teacher and the pupil did not say anything more for a while. Eventually, the rabbit said:

- Teacher! Do not abandon your retreat! Let you eat my meat.

The rabbit then jumped into the fireplace. Without hesitation, the monk quickly pulled the rabbit out of the fire. Its fur was lightly burnt but the hand of the monk was all getting red.

- You are too silly, my child!

Tears overflowed from the eyes of both the teacher and the pupil, the tears of love, of understanding, and of happiness.

The monk then stayed in the forest with his pupil until winter came. It was told that the rabbit was a previous incarnation of the Sakya-Muni Buddha.

*Based on a story in “Hoa-Nien”, a monthly journal of GDPT Dalat (1960?)*