

Buddhist Legends and Stories

The Love and Responsibility of a Tortoise Mother

Once upon a time, there was a tortoise mother living with a dozen of young children in a small lake. One year, there was a severe drought that lasted for months. The lake had been dried out. Fish were dying. The tortoise mother decided to leave their home for a better place. They crossed a hill under scorching sun. Children and mother were all deadly thirsty and tired.

By noon, they arrived at the shadow of a big tree. They all stopped and quickly fell in deep sleep. Suddenly, the mother heard a soft noise on her shell. A lizard fell from a tree branch while he was playing a chasing game with others. The tortoise mother closed her eyes, continuing her sleep. Just a short moment later, an afflatus jolted in her mind. She felt uneasy. She quickly called the children to leave the tree immediately. Some asked:

- “Why? Mum.”
- “I felt uneasy here. Let us see the lizards over there. They were playing, and one just fell on my shell.”
- “So what?”
- “I don’t know. However, I felt that this is not a good place.”
- “Mum! We were too tired. We did not have a single drop of water for days! Let us rest until evening.”
- “Children! See! Another lizard dropped here. Let us go. There was a small creek at the other side of the hill.”
- “I feel cool here. I don’t want to go under the sunshine again.”
- “Brother! Let us obey our mum.”
- “No sister, leave me alone.”
- “Me too, I’d rather stay here. My toes were bleeding.”
- “My poor sister! Let me see them. Oh! You should be very painful. There was no fresh grass here. I chewed this dry leaf to make a paste. It would make your toes stop bleeding. When we arrived at the creek, I will make another paste with fresh grass.”
- “Thanks, sister! I feel better now. I can go”

- “Children! Let us go before it was too late.”

All tortoises, except one, left the tree. A short moment later, the mother went back and insisted with the boy:

- “My child! Let us go with your siblings. I felt unsafe here but I could not explain to you. We were going for life, and in the mean time, the lizards were continuing playing.”

However, the boy was too stubborn.

- “Oh my boy! I pray for your safety. Your siblings are waiting.”

Eventually, the mother left. Tears flowed out from her eyes. The tortoises silently crawled across the hill. Suddenly, they heard loud howls, first one then many. They looked back at the tree. Dust clouds billowed over. A dozen elephants were running and howling around the tree. A lizard had fallen on an elephant and ran into its ear causing it to run madly and trample on everything around the tree.

Tears again were on the tortoise mother’s eyes. She went back to the tree and found the child with the broken back shell. She became unconscious. She remembered the days when her children were swimming in a lake. They followed her to get water lilies. The water was so cool...

- “Mum!”

A soft voice brought her back. She opened her eyes. Her eldest girl sadly looked at her:

- “Mum! My brothers and sisters have been waiting for you.”
- “Oh...”

It was told that the tortoise mother was an incarnation of the Sakya-Muni Buddha.

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