

## The Tigress Jataka

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Long, long ago, ages before the bodhisattva attained perfect enlightenment and became the Buddha of our world-age known as Shakyamuni, he was born into a family of wealthy Brahmins. He grew up learning the wisdom, rituals, and skills of his station. When he was grown he was honored. Nobles saw that he had the bearing of a king; the wise looked up to him as a sage. Warriors and merchants felt he had the wisdom of a

leader. He was also a naturally gifted teacher, drawn to guiding others along a path of selfless generosity, which in time he decided was his true calling. So he left the city for the forest, where he established a hermitage for those seeking to enter the higher life. One day years later, now a teacher, he was walking in the forest with one of his disciples. It had not rained for some weeks. The trees were bare, the grass brittle, and the streambeds nearly dry. Suddenly they heard a series of coughing roars coming from somewhere very close nearby. The student listened and said, “Master, those are the roars of a tiger—a hungry tiger. We’d better go back. Now.” But the teacher said, “Wait a moment. Listen again. Those are not simply the roars of a hungry tiger. They are the roars of a starving one. Let’s go on a bit further and see if there’s anything we might do to help.” Reluctantly the disciple agreed. In a short time they came to the edge of a cliff. Looking down, they saw what was clearly a starving tiger; a tigress, actually, for two small cubs were trying to nurse from her. But every time they approached, the tigress roared miserably and drove them away. She was emaciated, just skin and bones, with all her ribs plainly showing. When she looked at her cubs, her eyes narrowed and seem to glaze over. It was clear that in her desperation she had begun to view them, her own children, as prey, as meat.

“Quick,” said the bodhisattva to his student. “Run and see if you can find some food for this starving animal. She may be driven to eat her own cubs if she doesn’t have food soon. The karma arising from that will be terrible. I’ll wait here and do what I can to stop her from harming her cubs till you return.” The disciple ran off. The teacher watched him go, then turned back to watch the tigers below. How pitiful, he thought, watching them. Even as the bodhisattva watched, he saw the starving tigress struggle to rise up on her front legs, hindquarters still on the ground. She tried again.

And again. At last she managed to rise and, growling and drooling, tottered unsteadily toward her tiny cubs. My disciple is not going to be back with food in time to stop her now, thought the bodhisattva. But I can't just stand idly by and let this happen. Mind is vast, totally empty, and cannot be found. This body, so much matter, is the crystallization of my own past thoughts and deeds extending back into the endless past. My deepest wish has ever been to save sentient beings. To fail to act when there is opportunity would only be a cause for regret. He removed his robe and hung it on a branch of the tree. Then, like a man preparing to simply dive into a lake, he put his hands together and leapt from the cliff. Startled by the sound of something crashing through the trees and bushes behind her, the tigress crouched down in fear, then turned to look. And saw the bloodied body of a man stretched out on the rocks at the base of the cliff. Gathering her remaining strength she lunged forward and began to feed. When the disciple returned, apologetic and empty-handed, he saw the teacher's robe hanging on the tree at the cliff's edge. He called the teacher's name but there was no response. Fearing the worst, he went forward and looked down over the cliff's edge. And saw the tigress feeding. With a cry, the disciple threw himself to the ground by the base of the tree and wept. At last he rose, dried his eyes, and, in awe, carried the robe as a sacred relic back to the hermitage. Once there, he told the tale of their teacher's sacrifice to the other disciples. Then he led them all back to the spot. There they festooned the tree with garlands of flowers. When the tigress and her cubs departed, the disciples all descended the cliff, gathered the bodhisattva's bones, and built a jeweled stupa in which to house them. The gods, stunned themselves by what they'd witnessed, descended to Earth where the bodhisattva's body had been devoured and his blood shed and covered the ground with precious incense, fine sandalwood powder, and heavenly perfumes. Even now the bodhisattva's selfless deed is remembered by those very gods, and by humans, too, who know the tale. It will never be forgotten, even as long ages pass in which high mountains and great civilizations rise and fall, never to be heard of again. (Rafe Martin. *Endless Path: Awakening Within the Buddhist Imagination: Jataka Tales, Zen Practice, and Daily Life*, North Atlantic Books. 2010).

Aryasura placed this jataka first in his important 4<sup>th</sup> century Mahayana collection of 34 jatakas, the *Jatakamala* or *Rosary of Jatakas*. From the start, then, he showed what the Path is about: compassionate, selfless action arising out of non-duality. There is a beautiful miniature 7<sup>th</sup> century Buddhist shrine with paintings of the Tigress jataka on it at Horyuji Temple in Nara. Unfortunately, the area it is in was closed when we were there on pilgrimage last March. The paintings on this "Tamamushi Shrine" show the bodhisattva hanging his robe on a branch of a tree at the edge of a cliff. Below that, you see him gracefully suspended head-first in mid-air after leaping off the cliff. Below that you see his body being devoured. It is very powerful. Like so-called "clam Zen" — this jataka opens wide and shows everything — its organs, heart, and guts. The Bodhisattva, seeing another's suffering, shows the deepest meaning of the Buddhadharmā by responding. He does not step back and say, how pitiful, and shed a tear and go on. He does not feel like he's above that

suffering. Hotei enters the market with helping hands, muddied and dust-covered, with a great smile and booming laugh. And he gives stuff, he does stuff. He doesn't stand there smiling and laughing, because he is a jolly fellow, like Santa Claus. Or that he has no cares. Rather he's not taking things personally. He's no longer standing in the steady drizzle of "me and my." He's not tried to get rid of me and my, either. It's that it's all fallen into perspective, like when your vision is off and then you get a new prescription and everything falls into place. You see correctly. Then you can do things correctly. Like drive a car and not hit anyone or kill yourself with your own uncorrected blindness. Me and my is a kind of partial blindness. Zen practice corrects our bad vision.

The 13<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, (the one before our current 14<sup>th</sup>) always commented on just one jataka EACH year at the Great Prayer Festival held annually in pre-communist Tibet. This one. The Tigress Every year, he spoke just on this one. Again and again. He found it inexhaustible. Selflessness, courage, compassion, commitment, non-dual prajna wisdom, generosity –all are here. For us, too, it is inexhaustible.

In many native spiritual traditions, we find respect for the sacred value of all life. It is the mystery all our ancestors felt when looking into the eyes of a dying deer, or saw the green life throbbing in a leaf of wild plum. This respect for life itself remains central in Zen, even today. Ryokan – the Zen beloved Zen poet and monk whose training temple, Entsuji we visited this past spring –cut a hole in the roof of his little hut so a bamboo plant could continue to grow and not be stifled. The great, yet poverty-stricken haiku poet, Issa, aired his fleas and lice on sheets of paper when he washed his clothing. Then he put them back into his clothes afterward. In their small selfless acts of compassion, the Tigress jataka lives on!

Our Zen ancestors extended a mind of compassion to all living things. Torei Zenji, Hakuin's great heir, in his Bodhisattva's Vow says:

**I am only a simple disciple, but I offer these respectful words**

**When I regard the true nature of the many dharmas, I find them all to be sacred forms of the Tathagata's never-failing essence. Each particle of matter, each moment, is no other than the Tathagata's inexpressible radiance.**

**With this realization, our virtuous ancestors gave tender care to beasts and birds with compassionate minds and hearts.**

He and others did not do this because the Buddha said, "Even as a mother regards her only child, so should we monks regard all living things," and then they tried to live up to it. They did it, because they awoke to not-two, not even One and could not do otherwise. Then out of pity for moths they did not light lamps at night, and in respect for the life of a mouse they did not put out traps, but bits of food, instead.

Once in another long ago past life jataka, the Bodhisattva as a rabbit jumped into a fire to feed a starving beggar with his body. In this jataka, that same Bodhisattva, seeing a starving tigress about to devour her cubs, again gives the only food at hand – himself. “Where can I find food?” he thinks, “From where will help come? How can I myself save beings and offer nourishment?”

It is our dilemma, too. Food is always essential. But what is essential food? An Eskimo shaman said, “Our great danger is that our food consists of souls.” For indigenous hunting-gathering peoples, life poses a dilemma that requires attention and care: “To live, I must take life, and, in taking life, I run the risk of meeting difficult consequences. How can I live so as to lessen the harm?” This is the foundation of the ancient practice of ahimsa – choosing to cause the least possible harm. Our behavior improves with this at our core. Prayers, ceremonies, rituals of thanks are generated and hungry ghost dishes created. (Interestingly, when I was spending time at Zuni Pueblo, I discovered that when I ate in someone’s home bits of dry food were put in an offering dish before the meal, then put in the fire – an offering to the ancestors. If such similar ceremonial offerings occur in both Asian tradition – and in native America, this must reflect a very old impulse.) Eating is the primal mystery of life. We live by gift – even plants are conscious – as Buddhist tradition says, and modern science confirms. Indeed, these days we are realizing that trees share information, nurture their young, care for their aged – that a forest is a living being. Even as vegetarians our eating can cause harm. Climates and eco-systems are disrupted by modern mega-farming methods. Workers are exploited, animals harmed, waters polluted, and the air poisoned. Eating consciously, giving thanks and respect to our food, to every bite and every morsel of it and to all who brought it to us, is the *least* we can do.

In the Vimalakirti sutra it says that in times of famine the Bodhisattva brings food, *then* preaches Dharma. Food comes first. To help we have to give what is needed. To do that we have to recognize what’s needed. And, to do that, we have to be awake and *present*. And for that we have to give away our own habitual self-centeredness.

The Tigress jataka is a most dramatic metaphor of this giving of self-centeredness that is the essence of practice-realization. Sitting zazen IS giving completely as Dogen says, for it is, “dropping body and mind.” It is not simply sitting on a mat, not moving, while daydreaming about rearranging the living room furniture back home. It is just this count! One . . . two . . . three! Just this breath. Just this koan point! This, dropping of self-concern is a very ancient path, the core of all real spirituality. It’s roots probably go back to the Paleolithic.

Of course, the Tigress jataka may also be a stunning account of an actual historic event – the record of a past life of the Buddha of our world age, Shakyamuni. As such it is beyond comprehension, directly totally selflessly unmistakably embodying compassion, generosity, and selflessness. It was not done for a friend, or in a time of disaster or war when selfless deeds do tend to occur. Then, under stress, the ego opens up and our selfless nature emerges like a butterfly from its cocoon. No. This was a pure act of selfless compassion, arising out of a courageous aspiration that is simultaneously deep realization of non-duality. For in this instance this great selfless act of compassion and literal self-giving is

done not even for a stranger in difficulty but for the sake of wild predator, a being that would kill and eat us if it could. This is nothing less than astonishing.

At some time we will all, as conscious human beings, are going to find ourselves facing some version of this. That is, we are going to personally see things that will make us ask with our whole heart, "How can I help?" And we will be driven to find some response, some answer. But to truly answer, we must know ultimately the Mind that is asking, the mind itself that gives rise to that asking. Truly seeing a tigress's anguish without warding off the pain of that seeing IS itself and act of the vast true empty mind of compassion. Asking, "Where is food?" IS the *action* of that mind of compassion.

"Why did Bodhidharma come from the West? Or, "What is the highest, deepest meaning of the Buddhadharma?" is a question often posed in Zen. Hsiang lin (Kyorin) answered, "Sitting long, getting tired." Yuan-wu (Engo), commenting on this in the *Blue Cliff Record*, tells us that sitting long getting tired has nothing to do with sitting for a long time. Here is a nail in the wall, the grain of wood in the floor, the caw of a crow. Is anything held back? The most profound reality is presented as high drama in the Indian jatakas, but as quite ordinary and mundane in the mondo and koans of ancient China. The Bodhisattva leaps from a cliff to feed a starving tigress and her cubs with his own body. Hsiang-Lin says, "Sitting long, getting tired." He, too, holds nothing back.

In Zen, wisdom is not just a matter of realizing the unity of life but also of recognizing the ultimate worth of each living thing. Zen teaches us to awake, which means not to live in self-centered dreams, separated from this flower, this bird, this tigress, this specific person. When we Awake to even a slight degree we momentarily drop habitual self-centeredness. We let go of the deeply rooted idea of My body, My mind. We become conscious of what has always been, eternal, selfless, pure as the Kanzeon says; the original Face from before our parents were born.

Roshi Kapleau used to say that from an Absolute perspective, the life of an ant, a flea, or an Einstein are equal: equally mysterious, equally central to the universe. Equally IT. This is the realm of prajna – no eye ear nose tongue body mind. No self no other. Nothing to compare an ant to, nothing to make an ant's worth relative, that is, compared to the life of an Einstein. Each is simply mysteriously itself. And ant is an Ant is an ANT!

This worth, this sacredness of each life, is what the Bodhisattva commits to in the Tigress jataka. He shows us that the function of prajna is compassion. Compassion is embodied wisdom. "Like water and ice without water no ice" to misappropriate a line from Zen master Hakuin's "Zazen Wasan," "Song in Praise of Zazen." Selfless, Bodhisattvic activity takes place in the world of comparisons, the ordinary world of relativity where a tigress is just a bloodthirsty predator, and a person is categorized as prince, beggar, fool, sage, rich or poor, man or woman, tall or short. But such action steps forward into the ordinary from the realm of prajna. And yet, these two realms are not separate. They are not-two not even One. Form is emptiness, emptiness form. Here lies the heart of all true Zen.

Wisdom that is compassion seem foolishness to our ordinary, self-centered self. Ryokan's other spiritual name was Daigyū – Great Fool. “The thief left it behind, the moon at the window” he wrote after being robbed. He wasn't being nice, or even mindfully accepting his difficulty. He, too, was leaping from a cliff being a great maha prajna fool! Presenting naked truth!

To see that the life of another is as valuable as my own life is the beginning of doing something about it. Not reacting defensively and self-centeredly to our problems is the beginning of acting positively. Greed, anger, and ignorance are not separate illnesses. Greed, anger, and ignorance are side-effects. The illness is duality. The cure is not emptiness as separate from form. The medicine is in the illness. It is homeopathic. In realizing that the starving tigress is us, we begin to do something about her plight. But as the jatakas show, it may be lifetimes before that realization functions. So we keep at it. Commitment is perseverance, is enthusiasm, and this too, is prajna.

Self-centered practice is wiped away by ongoing practice. Thoughts of “How can I manipulate the structure of sesshin to work for me” dissolve, as we come to see that we *Are* sesshin. Then we are no longer separate, trying to use the schedule to get something; so, too, with the daily actualities of life. We *are* the circumstances, difficulties, tangents, obstacles, anxieties, setbacks, responsibilities, failures. There is a key to equanimity or steadiness in the face of difficulties. It is not stoicism or detachment. That key is ongoing practice-realization. Not just the work of practice and not just a moment of awakening. The ongoing practice of realization, the realization of practice give us space to breathe even when our back is against the wall, or when we stand at a cliff's edge. Or as Lotus Sutra chapter on Kanzeon puts it when there is a mass of fire or the executioner's sword is poised, or if demons gather or – well, fill in the blanks from your own life, there is still a way to be free. That way is itself Kanzeon, Kannon, Bodhisattva of Compassion, selfless Hearer of the cries of the world.

The tigress jataka is a dramatic expression of one totally giving, totally seeing, totally acting, totally realized selfless moment. It shows a non-dual Absolute perspective – tigress as myself – as well as its selfless compassionate expression. It faces head-on the ancient question, “What should I do about someone else's suffering if, in the deepest sense, that someone else is myself?”

At the same time let's be honest: this jataka is inexplicable and makes no sense. For relatively speaking, the life of a tigress is NOT equal to the life of a realized sage like prince Mahasattva. It is right NOT to want to be eaten by a wild animal. Our daughter, Ariya, was trailed by a mountain lion when she lived in Montana. To that hungry carnivore she was just meat. To find we are not our cherished thoughts, hopes, aspirations, plans but that we are, whether we mean to offer it or not, simply someone's meal can be a very disagreeable realization. But if you doubt the reality of this, just ask a mosquito – she knows.

Yet there is a deep placeless place where, when we see another's suffering – any creature's suffering – we just want to help. Most of the time we hold back to act more reasonably: “I already gave.” Or, “That's terrible, but what can I do?” “Or I'll send some money.” Or we may

think, “Ah. The terrible sadness of life,” and be motivated to practice more deeply. But good as any of that is, it is not ultimate. Even the ultimate is not ultimate if we stick to it. A Zen saying goes – “Even Shakyamuni himself is only halfway there.”

The Buddha went on and on, countless lives after this profound act of giving, refining his already lofty view. Form is emptiness, emptiness form is the heart of perfect Prajna wisdom. To realize this fully is the endless path of the Bodhisattva. Shakyamuni, after countless lives of dedicated practice-realization awoke to it more fully than any being in our world age. There are two ways tradition records that moment of Awakening. “Wonder of wonders! All beings are Buddhas (or Buddha) fully innately inherently endowed with wisdom and compassion. Only their self-centered delusions prevent them from knowing it.” And also, “At this moment, I together with all beings on the great earth have attained the Way.” To realize this vast empty mind is to realize what's always been, what's always here, and what is the true nature of all. Nothing is added, only our self-centered delusions taken away. This, too, is leaping from the cliff. And provides not an end, but a new beginning.

The challenge and the meaning of Zen and the Way of the Bodhisattva, comes down to this moment. How do we live this breath? How do we relate to this river, this person, this bird, this morning star, this living, this aging, this dying? How will we enter each moment, each situation, fresh and new, nothing held back? There doesn't need to be a tigress and cubs. For us, there is this wall, this flower, this pain in the knee, this rumbling stomach, this angry neighbor, this impossible boss, this ailing friend, this waking at 3 AM thinking about our children and our world. This is more than enough for the likes of us.

In sesshin, we take away our ordinary self-centeredness, our hide-outs and habits, hobbies, responsibilities, even loves; the attachments that make us who we are. We let ourselves get eaten by the schedule, the breath, the koan, the hours of zazen, by dokusan; by Buddha, Dharma, Sangha. This choice to briefly forgo our ordinary life is a step towards homecoming, happiness and wisdom. Sesshin does not cause wisdom. Rather, it helps us see the wisdom that it always ours. It, too, is a way of leaping from a cliff to feed a starving beast.