



The Young Man Who Refused to Kill

Tibet

In the towering mountains of Tibet, there was once a young man named Tashi, the son of a humble couple who were entering old age. The couple often complained to their three oldest daughters, who were married to rich men, of the youngster's sensitivity. He would not kill any animal and so he could not provide food for his parents. He also refused to eat meat.

'He should have entered a monastery,' his mother complained bitterly, 'if he's not going to hunt, what kind of life awaits us in old age? We are going to have to ask for alms from our daughters and our neighbours, or else we will go hungry. What are we going to do with him, if he is not able to take care of us when we can no longer take care of our needs or his?'

But the young man repeated once again:

'All life is sacred. I will not kill any living being.'

One day, the father forced Tashi to accompany him on a hunting trip through the mountains. They were walking for several hours, after which the man began to feel tired, but also downhearted: in all that time, he had only managed to catch a small rabbit.

'This son of mine ... I feel he brings bad luck,' he thought.

It was then that they realised they had found their way onto the road to the sacred sanctuary of Chenrezig, the Buddha of Compassion and patron saint of Tibet, an object of great devotion to the people of the

mountains. They stopped on the way to eat a piece of cheese and two pieces of fruit. As they ate Tashi began to carve the prayer Om Mani Peme Hum on a rock, as pilgrims normally did on this path.

The father observed his son and, silently, repeated to himself the sacred prayer, while running his fingers through the beads of his worn *mala*, his prayer rosary. The man knew that killing is an act that goes against the beliefs of Buddhism, but Buddha had lived in India, where fruits and vegetables grow everywhere, while in Tibet it was hard to survive without eating meat, especially for the poor. The man had always tried to kill animals in the most compassionate way he could, and had prayed for his victims. But his son would not understand.

They continued on their way, turning off the path to return home when, suddenly, the man saw a large brown hare. It had been weeks since he had seen an animal of such a size. He had to catch it.

Slowly, he crouched down, making Tashi do the same. Armed with his sling and a sharp stone, he waited for the animal to pause. As he raised his arm, preparing to throw the fateful stone, Tashi stood up and shouted:

‘No, father! Please, do not kill him!’

The hare dashed away zigzagging and jumping amongst the bushes, while Tashi’s father clenched his fists tightly, turning red with anger.

‘Why did you do that?’ he shouted at his son.

Tashi took a step back. He had never seen such a look of hatred in the eyes of his father.

‘Tell me, why did you do that?’ the man insisted, advancing threateningly toward his son.

Tashi felt afraid. Asking for forgiveness, he glanced around, looking for an escape. On the other side of the road, on a slope, there was a crack between the rocks.

‘Why did you chase away the hare?’ his father asked again, bending down to grab a large rock.

The young man ran to the crack in the rocks, his father in pursuit. Tashi managed to slip through the narrow crack, just as his father threw the rock. He avoided the full force of his father's anger, but the rock wounded his leg.

The compassionate young man crawled into a small cave that opened in the rock, knowing that his father, being a stout man, would not be able to follow him. His leg hurt terribly, and blood poured out of the wound. Overwhelmed by what had happened and by the powerful emotions that his father's attack had raised, Tashi collapsed unconscious.

When he woke up, the sunlight streaming through the crack in the rocks had the reddish tones of sunset. His father would have left long ago, because it was dangerous to spend the night in the mountains. Tashi's leg hurt intensely, and he worried that he would not be able to get out of the cave on his own. But he heard steps on the road outside and called out for help. The steps stopped and the head of a young monk, poked through the crack.

The monk supported him, as he limped out onto the road. Two older monks lay him down in a patch of herbs and treated the wound. They asked him what had happened, and Tashi told them his story. One of the older monks invited Tashi to accompany them all on their pilgrimage to the sacred sanctuaries, offering him a monk's habit so he would go unnoticed among them.

On their journey through the mountains, they found themselves at the doors of Tashi's older sister. Following the customs of the land, the woman welcomed the monks, gave them food and offered them a quiet place to rest. She did not recognise her brother under the habit of a monk, partly because she had not seen him for quite some time.

'Have you crossed paths with a lonely young man on your travel?' the woman asked. 'My brother disappeared a few days ago, and we do not know where to look for him.'

The older monk shook his head, and told her that, if they saw him, they would tell him about his family's concern.

The next day, they came to the house of Tashi's second sister. As had happened before, this sister did not recognise the young man

either, and also asked the monks if they had seen her brother on the roads. The older monk gave the same answer and, after eating a little and resting a little, they resumed their pilgrimage to the sanctuaries.

On the third day, they arrived at the home of Tashi's youngest sister. This time, she did recognise her brother, despite his clothes. She sent for her two sisters immediately and they organised a party to celebrate Tashi's reappearance. The three monks were given food, blankets and abundant alms for taking care of their brother. After the monks left, the sisters asked Tashi to stay with them. But the young man declined their invitation. Instead he asked for their blessings, since he wanted to leave and start his own life.

The sisters were sad to hear this, but they could not force him to stay, so they asked him to accept a gift for his new life: a beautiful white horse.

Tashi mounted his new white horse and departed in the direction of a remote region in the steppes, where green meadows stretched almost to infinity.

One day, when he stopped to contemplate the beauty of one of those fertile plains, Tashi heard his horse say.

'I want you to do something. Kill me, then spread my skin over the ground, and then spread my mane to the wind.'

The surprise of discovering that his horse was a magical horse did not prevent from feeling horrified about the animal's proposal. He would never do that, especially to a horse as special as this white one. But, that night, while Tashi was sleeping, his horse jumped off a nearby cliff, plunging into the void.

The next morning, when Tashi woke up and did not see his horse, he went looking for him. He looked here and there, until finally he found the cliff and discovered his horse lying dead at the bottom of the ravine. Tashi went down to him and, to honour his memory, decided to follow the instructions the horse had given him the previous afternoon. He skinned the horse and cut off his mane, then returned to the green meadow where the horse had spoken. There he spread out the horse's skin and then spread his mane to the wind.

To his surprise, the skin of the horse turned into a large mansion, while the mane, dispersed by the wind to the far corner of the meadow, became sheep and yaks. The white horse appeared again, alive, before Tashi.

‘What you see in the meadow before you,’ said the horse, ‘is your reward for showing great compassion for all living beings.’

The magical animal turned around and galloped off across the plain, shiny sheets of gold appeared in his hoofprints. Tashi knelt on the ground and wept, giving thanks for the good fortune he had had, knowing that, now, he could support his father and his mother in their old age, and that he would never have to worry about how they were going to feed themselves.

Tashi took possession of the mansion and, shortly after, packed up his belongings, made a couple of wheat cakes, and left for the home of his parents. When he arrived, he climbed up onto the roof so that he could peer into the small sky-light. He saw his parents huddled in front of the small hearth fire. He climbed to the chimney and dropped one of the wheat cakes down it.

‘Gifts are falling from sky!’ his mother cried.

Although the cake was only wheat and had no meat, he saw his father eating it with relish. Tashi dropped the other cake down the chimney, and his mother picked it out of the embers.

Tashi climbed down from the roof and knocked on the door. As soon as his mother saw him, she threw herself into his arms in tears, telling him to stay with them and not to leave them again, even if he was not able to hunt animals. As for his father, he approached Tashi, his eyes clouded with tears, and asked forgiveness for what he had done. Tashi hugged his father and told both his parents that they would never again have to do without. He told them the story of the horse, about the mansion and the herds of sheep and yaks. When he took them to his new house, he put his mother on a golden throne, and his father on a silver throne, reserving for himself a throne of pink mother-of-pearl. □

Adapted by Grian A. Cutanda and Alette Willis (2019).

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Comments

The proposal of the Earth Charter which this story illustrates might be one of the most difficult ones for people outside of Buddhist culture to accept. Giving an intrinsic value to all forms of life leads us, necessarily, to rethink many of our customs, even to question our lifestyles. Should we draw the line as to what is acceptable and what is necessary in our eating habits for example? There can be no conclusive answers on this issue, and it is possible that we may even find ourselves in a situation similar to that of Tashi's father. Native American cultures have addressed this dilemma by demonstrating reverential respect for the animal whose life had been taken away (see *The Earth Stories Collection*, Chapter 3). The next section and story continue this theme.

Sources

Hyde-Chambers, F. & A. (1981). The young man who refused to kill. In *Tibetan Folk Tales* (pp. 76-82). Boulder & London: Shambhala Publications.

Keding, D. & Brinkmann, K. A. (2016). The young man who refused to kill. In *The Gift of the Unicorn and Other Animal Helper Tales* (pp. 27-30). Santa Barbara, CA: Libraries Unlimited.

Associated text of the Earth Charter

Principle 1: Respect Earth and life in all its diversity.

Other passages that this story illustrates

Preamble: Universal Responsibility.- The spirit of human solidarity and kinship with all life is strengthened when we live with reverence

for the mystery of being, gratitude for the gift of life, and humility regarding the human place in nature.

Principle 1a: Recognize that all beings are interdependent and every form of life has value regardless of its worth to human beings.

Principle 2: Care for the community of life with understanding, compassion, and love.

The Way Forward: Let ours be a time remembered for the awakening of a new reverence for life.

