



The Mandarin Ducks and the Samurai

Zen Buddhism - Japan

In ancient Japan, in a lagoon near what is now Maizuru, north of Kyoto, lived a pair of mandarin ducks. It was spring, and they had recently hatched their young. The male still had his spectacular colours –his dark orange beard, his green, blue and red plume, and his bill the colour of coral– and exhibited himself before his mate and their offspring as only a mandarin duck can do.

At the same time, a young samurai and his wife built their house on the banks of this lagoon. The samurai had not yet entered into the service of a feudal lord. Although he already had the traditional swords of a samurai, he still had not made enough money to buy the attire of his profession. And, as if that were not enough, his wife was now pregnant. The samurai's full attire would have to wait, but the young man still felt happy, knowing he was going to be a father.

One evening, during dinner, his wife told him that she felt the irresistible need to eat meat, assuming that this was a need of the child in her womb.

'I know we do not have enough money to buy meat,' she added, 'but I do not want to hide anything from you, my beloved.'

Her young husband said nothing but, later that night, after his wife had fallen asleep, he got out of bed, took his bow and went hunting. He went through the nearby beech forest but, finding no prey, he chose to hide in the cane field on the shore of the lagoon, waiting for the first light of dawn, hoping to catch some water bird.

But behold, in the middle of the night, unexpectedly, he caught sight of a male mandarin drake emerging from his nest in the hollow of a tree. Under the moonlight, his silhouette made a perfect target. The young samurai shot his arrow and felled the drake. He picked up his inert prey from the ground, put it in a sack, and returned home. When he got home, he hung the sack from a tree and went back to bed.

Just as he was about to give himself up to sleep, a strange sound woke him up again. It sounded like the beating of wings.

‘Is the duck still alive and I did not notice?’ he asked himself. He got up again, grabbed a knife, and left the cabin. To his surprise, he discovered that the sound was not from the duck he had hunted, which remained as motionless as before inside the sack, but from the female duck, who was perched on a branch above where he had hung her mate. She fluttered her wings as if trying to restore his life.

The young man then thought about killing the female too. ‘More meat for my wife and my son,’ he thought. But, when he approached the duck, she looked at him, showing no fear. The female duck did not seem to care about her fate, and she kept fluttering over the male’s body, as if in a strange ritual of mourning, as if mourning her murdered mate.

A very deep feeling seized the young samurai, an overwhelming compassion he had never felt. With tears in his eyes, he returned to the cabin, woke up his wife and told her what happened, the moving display of conjugal love that the mandarin duck had made.

‘I’m sorry I told you about the meat,’ she told him. ‘I would not eat that duck now for anything in the world.’

In Zen Buddhist *sanghas*, it is now said that the young man did not complete his process to become a samurai. They say that the compassion he felt for the mandarin duck transformed his view of reality and after that event, he dedicated his life to protect all animals. After his death, his name was venerated as that of a holy man. □

Adapted by Grian A. Cutanda (2018).

Under license Creative Commons CC BY-NC-SA.



Comments

I have only found one version of this story, an adaptation made by Henri Brunel (2005) in French and English, which was later translated into Spanish (Brunel, 2006).

Sources

Brunel, H. (2005). *Les plus beaux contes zen*. Paris: Editions du Seuil.

Brunel, H. (2006). *Los más bellos cuentos zen*. Palma de Mallorca: José J. de Olañeta.

Associated text of the Earth Charter

Principle 15: Treat all living beings with respect and consideration.

Other passages that this story illustrates

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.

Principle 15b: Protect wild animals from methods of hunting, trapping, and fishing that cause extreme, prolonged, or avoidable suffering.

