



The Brave Parakeet

Buddhism – Malaysia / Indonesia / China / India

Many years ago, deep in a large forest, the Buddha was incarnated in the form of a parakeet. Her feathers were gray as ashes, and she loved to fly from tree to tree. One day, clouds as dark as the bottom of a well covered the sky. A lightning bolt struck the parched trunk of a dead tree, igniting a terrible fire in the jungle.

The parakeet smelled smoke. She flapped up above the canopy into the sky, and saw the fire spreading rapidly.

‘Fire! Fire!’ she shouted from the sky. ‘Flee! Flee to the river!’

In terror, animals began to run. Tigers and gazelles ran alongside each other. Now they had a common enemy, a formidable one that could kill them all. Everyone headed towards the river, the only place the flames would not reach.

‘The flames will not reach the river, but the smoke could still suffocate them!’ the parakeet thought. ‘And what about the trees? What will become of the trees and bushes? They cannot run!’

‘I have to do something!’ she said aloud and then coughed as the smoke began to affect her throat.

The little bird flew to the river.

‘Hurry, we must all take water into our mouths, in our claws, our beaks, whatever!’ she said to the animals that had already reached the waters. ‘We must put out the fire!’

‘It is too late!’ they shouted from below. ‘The best thing we can do is to stay here.’

‘But, what about the smoke?’ she replied. ‘Do not you understand that even if the flames don’t reach you, you can still suffocate? And where will you go if the whole forest burns down? What world are you going to leave to your children and to the children of your children?’

Not wanting to waste any more time, the parakeet plummeted into the river, soaked her plumage in the cold waters, and then bravely headed towards the fire. When she reached it, the wall of flames was so high, she had to fly higher than she had ever flown before. A roaring breath of heat hit her face, drying out her eyes, and the smoke stung her lungs. Swerving to avoid the flames, she kept flying until she reached the place where she thought she could do the most damage to the fire, she shook herself discharging the water ...

Hssssssssss!, she heard below as her water evaporated.

But that did not stop her. She returned through the flames and the smoke to the river, and again soaked her feathers in the water. Then she returned to the inferno of flames and unloaded her hope there ... Hssssssss ...

Again and again she went back and forth between the river and the fire, in a desperate struggle to save the forest, to save the lives of trees and plants, insects, amphibians, reptiles and mammals ... until she began to feel her feathers scorching. Her legs, reddened. Her eyes stung painfully, and her chest ached from inhaling smoke. But she refused to give up.

At that moment, someone in the heavens noticed what was happening below. Floating in their palaces of clouds, the devas, those gods of a happy sphere, began to observe the fire, and saw the parakeet coming and going in her impossible combat against the flames.

‘Do you see that tiny bird? It is crazy!’ commented one of the gods with a smile. ‘It is trying to put out a forest fire, drop by drop!’

All the gods laughed.

Well, not everyone laughed. Lord Indra, king of all the devas, and god of storms and lightning, had been the source of the fire and did not laugh. Instead, Indra was touched by the gesture of that little bird.

Without losing a second, Indra transformed himself into an immense golden eagle and descended toward the parakeet.

‘Get back, little bird!’ he said. ‘You will not be able to put out this fire! Get yourself to safety before it is too late!’

But the parakeet paid no attention to his words. She kept weaving through the towering flames to reach the centre of the fire and to dump the water from her feathers.

‘Stop! Go back! Listen to me!’ Lord Indra insisted. ‘Get to safety!’

‘I do not need a big ugly bird like you giving me advice from up there!’ she answered, finally coughing. ‘What I need ... cough, cough ... is assistance! Do you understand me? ASSISTANCE! If you’re not going to help me, leave me alone, I have a lot to do,’ she added, stopping every few words to cough. ‘And if I cannot put out the fire in this life, I swear I’ll come back and put it out my next life!’

The god Indra, burned by the heat, flew back up to the heights to get away from the earthly hell and think. He looked up and saw the rest of the devas laughing at what was happening, and he felt ashamed for his kind. He looked down and saw the terrified animals in the river, the trees dying, and that one tiny little parakeet, going back and forth to the river, not giving up in the face of a challenge that no bird could never overcome on its own. He made up his mind.

‘I will help you!’ Indra shouted from the heights.

He was so deeply moved that as he descended at full speed to help the parakeet, he began to cry.

As his tears fell on the fire the flames went out, one by one, with a PLOFFFFF! As his tears fell on the burnt trees, they recovered, sprouting green amongst the smoke and ashes. As his tears fell onto the ground, flowers bloomed in the burnt ground.

After all the flames were out, the parakeet finally stopped and smiled up at Lord Indra. In that moment, she realised that the god’s

tears had also fallen on her. Not only was the scorching erased from her feathers, but they had changed into a bright rainbow of colour: red, green, blue, yellow ... As she swooped down towards the river, the animals raised a cheer for their saviour and for her new beautiful plumage.

Thanks to the heroism of that parakeet, all the parakeets ever since then have worn beautiful multicoloured feathers. □

Adapted by Grian A. Cutanda (2018).

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Comments

This adaptation is mainly based on the versions by Rafe Martin (1999, 2012), Ringu Tulku (2012) and Ng Kok Keong (2017).

According to Buddhist master Rafe Martin, this story, which is usually described as a Jātaka story, does not actually appear in the usual collections Jātaka tales in Pali and Sanskrit. Its origins are instead to be found in a few moving verses of the Jātakastava. This is a short text from the ancient Iranian Buddhist kingdom of Khotan, now part of China, that was composed before the 9th century CE. The Jātakastava was discovered in the Thousand Buddha Caves in Dunhuang, China, in 1907. Martin also writes that there is a carving about this story at the gigantic Buddhist monument of Borobudur, in Central Java, Indonesia, and a painting of it in the Ajantā Caves, in Maharashtra, India. Ng Kok Keong describes this story as a popular tale in Malaysia.

In the original narrative of this story, the fire is extinguished by a cloud that creates the god Indra, rather than by Indra's tears. Also, nothing is said about the colourful plumage of the parakeet after the shower of the god's tears. These innovations to the story are attributable to Rafe Martin, who has been telling this story for more than 40 years. The transformation of the original male parakeet of this story into a female parakeet is also attributable to Martin.

What I have added here, which was not present in previous adaptations, is the concern for future generations (diachronic co-responsibility). This is a characteristic of complex systems thinking and of the values of the Earth Charter, which could easily be added to this story.

Sources

- Keong, N. K. (2017). The brave little parrot. In Tossa, W. (ed.), *ASEAN Folktales: A Collection of Folktales from ASEAN Countries*, pp. 22-24. Thailand: Mahasarakham University. Retrieved from http://research.msu.ac.th/artculture/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/ALL-ASEAN-Folktales_Wajuppa.pdf.
- Martin, R. (1999). The brave little parrot. In *The Hungry Tigress: Buddhist Myths, Legends and Jataka Tales*, pp. 93-96. Cambridge, MA: Yellow Moon Press.
- Martin, R. (2012). The brave little parrot. *Parabola: The Search for Meaning*, 37(1). Retrieved from <https://parabola.org/2017/01/31/the-brave-little-parrot-retold-by-rafe-martin/>.
- Tulku, R. (2012). *Confusion Arises as Wisdom: Gampopa's Heart Advice on the Path of Mahamudra*. Boston, MA: Shambhala, pp. 174-175.

Associated text of the Earth Charter

The Way Forward: Every individual, family, organization, and community has a vital role to play.

Other passages that this story illustrates

Principle 12c: Honor and support the young people of our communities, enabling them to fulfill their essential role in creating sustainable societies.

