



The Age of the Human Being

Isan (Thai-Lao) People - Thailand

Long, long ago, Phya Thaen, god of the heavens and creator, sent all creatures down to the Earth. As they were only passing through, he told them how many years they could live in the material world.

But it so happened that, when all the creatures had descended to Earth, he noticed that he had overlooked four creatures: the human being, the buffalo, the dog and the monkey. Aware of the disruption and mishaps that this act of neglect could cause to his creation, he summoned all four to his presence in order to solve the problem.

‘I don’t know what could have happened,’ he said when he had all four of them all in front of him, ‘but I’ve just realised that I didn’t tell you how many years you would have to live on Earth. So, I’m going to tell you now.’

In view of the momentousness of the occasion, the four creatures of Phya Thaen fell silent and respectfully raised their heads, awaiting the god of the heaven’s judgement.

‘You, human,’ he said, pointing at the man thoughtfully, ‘can live on Earth for thirty years.’

The human lowered his head in disappointment, but said nothing so as not to offend his creator.

‘You, buffalo,’ continued the god, ‘are going to have to live in close contact with the human, and I believe that the strength I gave you will ultimately work against you, for the human will make you work from

sunrise to sunset. With such strength, you could live for many years but, in order not to lengthen your suffering, I'll leave your life span as thirty years, like the human.'

The buffalo lowered its head in misery.

'My Lord,' said the buffalo without raising his head, 'could I not live for just ten years, since my life won't be easy? In return I promise to leave offspring so that the human can earn his food, but don't ask me to make such a sacrifice!'

Phya Thaen threw back his head and raised an eyebrow in surprise – no one had ever dared to retort when he pronounced his decrees!

'Ehem ... Well ...' hesitated the god, recognising that all beings, no matter as much of a creature of his as it was, were entitled to opinion and dissent. 'Are you sure you want to live for only ten years?'

'Yes, my Lord,' replied the buffalo meekly, finally raising its eyes. 'Ten years will be enough for me.'

'Well, then, be it as you wish,' the god concluded in a murmur, moved.

Then the human saw the opportunity to make his lifespan on Earth a little longer.

'Sir,' he uttered, finally plucking up courage to speak, 'couldn't I keep the twenty years that the buffalo didn't want?'

Phya Thien raised his eyebrow, again in wonder.

'Are you sure you want to live on Earth for longer? Life on Earth is not going to be easy and ...'

'Yes Sir, I'm sure,' the human interrupted his god, only to immediately cover his mouth, realising what he had done.

But Phya Thien did not mind his interruption.

'Well, be it as you wish, human,' he replied sternly. 'Your life will be fifty years on Earth.'

He then turned to the dog.

‘You, dog, I’m afraid you’ll have to suffer the human a lot too,’ said the god, looking at the man sideways. ‘The good heart I gave you will make you love him tenderly, and you’ll end up being friends with him. However, he’ll still leave you in charge of his things when he is asleep. Your nights will be filled with fear and sleeplessness. I grant that you may live as long as I gave him at first: thirty years.’

‘But, Sir,’ the dog dared to reply, ‘that’s a long time for me, and it means I won’t be free, I won’t be able to enjoy the forests, the mountains and the rivers like other brothers and sisters of mine whom you have created. Also, I’ll have to stay awake every night! Couldn’t I live for just ten years?’

Phya Thien looked at the dog and taking pity on him, as well as trying to mitigate his future sufferings, said in a whisper:

‘Yes, you’re right. You’ll live ten years, no more.’

‘Thank you, Sir,’ replied the dog with a sigh of relief.

‘And couldn’t I have the twenty years that the dog didn’t want, sir?’ the human suddenly blurted out, unable to contain himself.

The god raised his eyebrow again, though this time not for being surprised.

‘Are you sure you want to live seventy years, human?’

‘Yes, Sir. That’s what I desire the most.’

Phya Thien looking at the other animals and not quite understanding the situation, finally said:

‘Well, be it as you will... but don’t complain if, with the many setbacks as you’ll find on Earth, it’s a long time for you.’

‘Do not worry about that, Sir. I swear to you that I’ll not complain.’

But the god, knowing the human heart as only he could know it, knew that the human would not keep his word.

Finally, Phya Thien turned to the monkey.

‘You, monkey, I’ll give you thirty years to live, exactly same number of years I’d planned for all of you. You’re very similar to the human, so you’ll get along well. And, because I made you so funny, the human will laugh with you and make up stories and tales to talk about you.’

‘My Lord,’ replied the monkey cheekily, ‘I may get on well with him and he may find me amusing, but ... I don’t know why ... I sense that the human will use me in many ways, some of them even a little cruel. Why don’t you do with me as you did with the dog and the buffalo, and leave me the years of life on Earth in only ten?’

‘Then I’ll take the twenty that the monkey doesn’t want!’ the human suddenly jumped up without a second thought.

This time Phya Thien’s eyebrow almost reached the root of his hair.

‘Human, I fear that the ambition I gave you has been transformed into greed, and I warn you that greed will not bring you any good,’ the god admonished.

The human lowered his head in shame and stepped back in silence.

‘Be it as you both wish,’ concluded the god sternly. ‘Monkey, you’ll live ten years on Earth. And you, human, you’ll live ninety years, but your life will be shaped to the life of these other creatures which you are going to make suffer. Until your thirtieth year, which is what you were meant to exist for from the beginning, you’ll live as what you are, a human. From your thirties to your fifties, you’ll live like a buffalo, working from sunrise to sunset for the sustenance of others. From your fifties to your seventies, you’ll live like a dog, waking up at night, fearful of your future and the events of your life. And from your seventies to your nineties, you’ll live like the monkey, entertaining your grandchildren and telling tales and stories to anyone who comes near, and suffering the hardships of old age, so that you’ll learn that greed, the desire to accumulate so much, eventually leads to suffering.’

Thus, after the final judgement, the four creatures returned to Earth sealing, in this way, their time in the material world. □

Adapted by Grian A. Cutanda (2021).

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Comments

This story is from the Isan People who, originally, came from the Khorat Plateau in Thailand. It is a good example of how the same tale, told by different storytellers, can convey values that could be antagonistic.

As we found it, this story was clearly anthropocentric in its approach, taking for granted that the buffalo, the dog and the monkey should be at the service of the human, and in no way addressing the suffering of these species in the process. However, we have no doubt that any storyteller in the Isan culture, being aware of the true role of human beings in the web of life, would have adapted this story in a similar way to what as we have done here. They would have tried to make it clear that the use of other species by human beings causes suffering to those beings, and that this has consequences in one way or another.

However, the division of the human life span into four phases, three of which are metaphorically compared to the lives of other animals, is part of the original Isan story.

Sources

APCEIU, SEAMEO, SEAMEO INNOTECH, SEAMEO SPAFA (2010).
Telling Tales from Southeast Asia and Korea: Teacher's Guide.
Bangkok: Advanced Printing Service.

Associated text of the Earth Charter

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

Other passages that this story illustrates

Preamble: To move forward we must recognize that in the midst of a magnificent diversity of cultures and life forms we are one human family and one Earth community with a common destiny.

Preamble: The Challenges Ahead.- Fundamental changes are needed in our values, institutions, and ways of living. We must realize that when basic needs have been met, human development is primarily about being more, not having more.

Principle 15a: Prevent cruelty to animals kept in human societies and protect them from suffering.

The Way Forward: Life often involves tensions between important values. This can mean difficult choices. However, we must find ways to harmonize diversity with unity, the exercise of freedom with the common good, short-term objectives with long-term goals.

