

THE TREE SPIRITS (Vyaggha Jataka)



There was once a wise tree spirit who lived in a beautiful tree in a forest.



Not far from him lived another tree spirit in a big old magnificent tree.

Also in that forest there lived a ferocious lion and an equally ferocious tiger. There were several villages in the area, and the people from the villages had to

walk into the forests to find wood for cooking and warming their homes. They cut down trees to build new houses and buildings, and even cut down whole forests to plough the soil and plant crops such as wheat or vegetables.

But none of them dared to enter the big patch of forest where the two tree spirits lived. The ferocious lion and tiger lived there, and the people were well aware of it because they saw the big paw prints with claws in the mud near that patch of forest. Also, there were a few people walking along the road who had caught a glimpse of a big bushy mane or an orange-and-black-striped body lurking in the thick forest.

So none of the villagers had ever cut any tree in that patch of forest, and they walked quickly past it for fear that the lion or tiger might be hungry enough to attack and eat them.

In fact, the tiger and lion did kill and eat all kinds of creatures. The deer and antelope, monkeys and foxes, rabbits and birds – all were hunted and feasted on by the lion and tiger. After they were finished eating, they left the remaining animal bones on the ground and went away to rest. The bones stunk terribly after a few days.

The tree spirit who lived in the big old tree did not like to have to smell that stench and see the animal bones. He said to the wise tree spirit,



“Good friend, the forest is full of foul stench all because of this lion and this tiger. I can’t stand it any longer. I’m going to chase them away.”



The wise tree spirit said, “Good friend, it is just these two creatures that protect our homes, the trees. Once they are chased away, our homes will be destroyed. If men don’t see the lion and tiger tracks in the mud, they will think they have gone away and then the men will cut all the forest down, make it all one open space, and plough the land. All our trees will be destroyed! Please don’t do this!”

But the foolish tree spirit didn’t want to believe his friend and didn’t take his advice. He was too disgusted with the messy and smelly animal bones laying around. All he thought about was how gross it was, and that no one should leave a smelly mess in the forest. It annoyed him every day, and put him in a bad mood. He imagined how much better life would be without the lion and tiger to ruin everything around him.

One day he just couldn’t stand it anymore. Being a spirit, he could change his form. He transformed himself to appear like a huge frightening monster, and chased after the lion and tiger. They had never seen anything like that before and impulsively ran away. They went to another forest and found plenty of animals for food there, so they didn’t want to return to their old forest.

The people who walked along the road noticed that there were no more fresh lion or tiger tracks near the patch of forest where the lion and tiger lived before. They wondered what happened to the lion and tiger. After several months of not seeing any lion or tiger paw prints there, the villagers were quite sure that the lion and tiger must have died or gone away to another area.

One day, a group of men came and started cutting down trees in the forest.

The foolish tree spirit heard the rhythmic thuds of axes cutting into trees. He saw the trembling leaves and branches of trees that were being cut.



Trees fell with a groan and a loud crash onto the forest floor. Birds were flying around in all directions and animals were running away from the tree cutters. He realized that the wise tree spirit was right – once the lion and tiger were gone, the forest would be destroyed. He was frightened that the men would cut down all the

trees in the forest, including the huge old tree that he stayed in. Feeling desperately afraid, he had to admit his mistake to the wise tree spirit and beg him for advice. With an anxious voice, he said,

“Ah, friend, I didn’t do as you said, but instead I chased the creatures away and now men have found out that they are gone, and they are cutting down the forest! What is to be done?”

The wise tree spirit said, “The lion and tiger are now living in another forest. You must go and bring them back here.”

The other tree spirit went immediately to the other forest and found where they were. He stood in front of them and said, with a respectful greeting, “Come back O Tiger and Lion! Come back to the forest you lived in before and don’t let it be flattened into a field! Without you both, the men and their axes will cut it down. Without that forest, you will be homeless.”

The tiger and lion said, “Go away! We won’t come back.”



They had a new home there and didn't want to go back. There was nothing the tree spirit could do to change their mind.

The tree spirit, with deep sadness and regret, returned alone to the forest. And after a few days, the men had cut down the whole patch of forest, made it into a big field, ploughed the land and started planting grains there. The forest, all the animals and birds that had lived there, the wildflowers, the lush forest plants, and all the big lovely trees, were gone.

QUESTIONS (answers in parentheses):

1. What did the lion and tiger do that was annoying the foolish tree spirit? (they left stinking bones in the forest after they ate)
2. What did the wise tree spirit advise the other tree spirit not to do? (not to chase the lion and tiger away)
3. Why did the foolish tree spirit chase them away anyway? (he couldn't stand the smell and mess)
4. When he saw the trees being cut, what did he finally realize would happen after he chased the lion and tiger away? (the forest would be destroyed)
5. Why didn't the lion and tiger want to come back? (they were happy in the other forest, there were plenty of animals for food)

DHARMA DISCUSSION – Tolerance:

The tree spirit couldn't stand the smell and mess. He couldn't tolerate it. He had no tolerance for the lion and tiger's eating habits.

What does it mean when we have "intolerance" or "no tolerance"?

You might think of a food intolerance, when our body has a negative reaction, similar to an allergy, to a certain type of food.

But intolerance in the context of the Dharma is not an intolerance in the body but an intolerance in the mind: when we feel annoyed, angry or even hateful toward someone who is disturbing us in some way, or when we don't agree with what they say, what they do, or what they believe.

If we let our feelings of intolerance build up, we might say or do something that we later regret.

In the story, the foolish tree spirit let his feelings of intolerance build up until he got very angry and chased away the lion and tiger.

People who have different political views, different beliefs about religion, different lifestyles or cultures, or different expectations of how much noise is appropriate, often let their intolerance turn into deep hatred.

Like the tree spirit, their mind focuses on thoughts like, “they should not do that” or “what’s wrong with them?” and negative thoughts build up more and more, into rage or even violence.

What happens when big groups of people are not tolerant? They can end up fighting with each other or starting a war.

That is why it is so important for everyone to learn to be tolerant.

We have to live with many different kinds of people around us – in school, the neighborhood, when we travel, everywhere we go - people who have different views, cultures, attitudes, and behaviors.

Can you think of some ways we can become more tolerant of those who are different than us?

We can learn more about them, get to know them, so we can understand them, rather than thinking about how they “should” be more like us.

We can be compassionate, imagining how they might feel.

Of course, if someone is harming or putting us or someone else in danger, we don’t want to be tolerant of that; we must try to put a stop to it.

But if someone is just doing something annoying, what would you do to remain calm?

Remember not to be like the tree spirit – don’t think about they “shouldn’t do,” don’t try to control them, but instead control your own mind.

See if you can focus on what you’re doing rather than what they are doing.

Smile at them, and see if they get the gentle hint that they’re annoying you.

In some situations, we might ask to join in with them, such as when they are playing a game.

When we learn to calm our mind by practicing meditation and mindfulness, then we don’t get so easily annoyed.

And when we practice patience and tolerance more often, then we learn to be patient and tolerant in many different situations.

Sometimes, a person is clearly disturbing others – being loud, reckless, or doing something else that is very distracting, but not harming anyone.

Everyone has times when they are less tolerant - for example, when we are tired, ill, exhausted, overwhelmed with work, anxious, or unhappy. And some of us are naturally more sensitive to noise or other disturbances. What should you do in those situations, when someone is annoying you? You can move away, or you can nicely ask them to be more quiet, or kindly let them know what they are doing is distracting you. Talking about how you feel – such as “I feel annoyed when you do that” might get a better response than telling them what to do, such as “Stop doing that.”

What if they don't agree to be more considerate, what would you do? You could suggest something you can do for them so they are more willing to accommodate your needs. Working out a solution is better than holding in your feelings and then exploding with anger when you can't stand it anymore. For example, what do you think the tree spirit could have said to the tiger and lion? He could have suggested they not leave the animal bones near his tree. And what if they didn't agree? He could have offered to warn them when a hunter is coming if they would avoid leaving the bones near his tree.

What about when others are not tolerant, when they complain? And what if they complain about us? We can't force them to be tolerant or just expect them to be tolerant. Instead, we can be compassionate. Maybe they're having a bad day, or not feeling well. By respecting their need for peace, we can help them feel better. It doesn't mean we have to agree with their belief or point of view, but we can be respectful and compassionate.