

Stories - The Golden Goose

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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Today I will continue telling stories. I have been telling Jataka tales – *jati* means birth. They say these tales are of the former lives of the Buddha. Many of them are from when he was an animal. Jataka tales are like Aesop's fables or fairy tales. Many of them have characteristics of the fairy tales we tell children. As wonderful as they are for children, I sometimes think they are for adults. Perhaps, adults can understand their deeper meanings and apply them. Adults may have the best chance of living with the values of these wonderful tales.

The tale today is "The Golden Goose." It is very similar to the European story of a goose or chicken that lays golden eggs. Perhaps, some of these ancient stories were pan-cultural. They may have traveled throughout the world because people found them meaningful and inspiring.

In the Buddhist version of the story, there were two farmers, a husband and wife, and their two children. They eked out an existence on their farm, working hard and barely growing enough to support themselves and their children. It was a tough life. They lived on the edge of poverty and starvation.

I am going to change the traditional genders of the story. I think some of the ways these ancient stories are gendered are optional. Some fables are probably getting a little tired by having the same gender stereotypes. So it may be okay to change them.

In the story, the wife became sick, and she got progressively sicker. Soon it became clear that she was not going to survive – she was going to die. As she was lying in bed, she made a resolve that she would come back. She would be reborn in such a way that she could come back and support her family. And then she died.

The night after she died, the children had a dream. They dreamt that their mother had come back to see them. The mother said: "Dear ones. In a few months, I will come back. I will make sure you are okay, and I will support you so that you do not starve. When I come back, you will not recognize me. But I will identify myself to you, and you will know it is me."

The next morning, the children told their father about the wonderful dream. The father, who was already quite heartbroken from the loss of his wife, said, "Oh, dreams only make life more difficult. You feel disappointed. You should forget your dream." But the children did not forget their dream – they kept it alive. They talked about the dream and how their mother would come back.

Many months later, a goose waddled up the path toward the farm. The goose was quite large and fat, and its feathers were a peculiar golden color. When the farmer saw the goose, he thought: "Oh, food for our dinner. Finally! We have been hungry for days." The farmer went out to capture the goose, but the goose knew what was happening. It ran away into the forest and hid in safety.

Later in the day, the goose came back out when the farmer was inside cooking. It came up to the children who were playing outside and said to them: "My dear children, I am your mother. I have come back. I am here to take care of you in this way. Each day, pluck one feather from me – but only one feather. Hold the feather up to the sun, and it will turn to solid gold. You will have a gold feather, which you can sell. It will support and take care of the family." Then the goose said, "Do it right now." So the children plucked one feather and held it up to the sun. Sure enough – poof! – it turned into metallic gold.

The children ran back to their father, who was cooking in the kitchen, and said: "Look what we have! A goose came along and told us that if we plucked one of its feathers and held it up to the sun, it would turn into gold. And we could keep that gold. But there is a caveat. The goose said we can pluck only one feather a day." The farmer

was quite surprised and said, "Show me." They all went out outside and saw the goose. The children said again, "But you can only pluck one feather a day."

So the next day, the family plucked one feather from the goose, and sure enough, when they held it up to the sun, it turned to gold. They did that every day. Pretty soon, they had enough wealth to live safely and comfortably. They had enough food and clothes. The family's welfare had been taken care of.

Under those circumstances, the farmer got more and more comfortable. But he felt some discontent. He said: "Well, there may be a fortune here. I could get very wealthy from this goose. What if I pluck out all the feathers? Then I will have a big fortune, and who knows what I can do next"? But the children said: "No, no. You cannot do that. Just one feather a day."

The farmer waited and thought about it. He thought: "Well, it is dangerous if I let the goose live around here. Wolves and foxes might come along and gobble it up, and then we will have no feathers at all. It is better to harvest all the feathers now and have the wealth than to have the possibility of losing it all."

So when the kids were off playing, the farmer grabbed the goose and pulled out fistfuls of its feathers. He pulled out all the feathers and put them in a basket. Then he held the basket up to the sun so they would turn into gold. And lo and behold, nothing happened. Distraught, the farmer scattered the feathers on the ground so they would all get direct sunlight. Nothing happened. The farmer yelled out in despair, "Oh, no!"

The children heard their father, ran to him, and saw what had happened. They said: "Oh, no! Mother told us we could only take one feather from the goose a day." The farmer said: "Your mother? No, no." Then the farmer said, "Well, you know, the goose's feathers will grow back."

So they waited some days and weeks, and the feathers did grow back. But the feathers were now a dull gray rather than their previous golden color. And when they plucked a feather and held it up to the sun, nothing happened. After some time, the goose flew off and never came back.

However, it was not a complete disaster because of all the gold feathers they already had. They had enough to see to their well-being for the rest of their lives. So they continued living this way, and the kids grew up well enough.

Greed. All of us are recipients of generosity. In a sense, our world is like a golden goose. Our world provides feathers that we can harvest, take care of, and use to live well. But then we get greedy and afraid of losing it all. We want more and more and more.

On this planet, for hundreds of years – even as far back as two to three thousand years ago – we have been overconsuming, over-farming the land and destroying it. Many civilizations have died out because the land became infertile.

Human beings tend to overdo. We take too much – more and more – and we destroy the very thing that is providing for us. Greed is the drive to consume, to have, to want. We are not carefully contenting ourselves with the one feather that is enough for us to live well and happily. Instead, we strive for more and more.

What is your golden goose? What are the feathers that you collect? When do you take so much that it is more than is given, more than is sustainable – and that may even destroy the goose? I wonder how many people have gone into debt this way. How many have consumed so much that they cannot repay their debts and are in trouble?

Meditation is one of the ways of learning how to abide in deep contentment, deep satisfaction, and a deep sense of well-being and peace, which is not dependent on material goods, wealth, and having more things. Meditation can allow us to grow in a healthy way. The Buddha used the word "abundance" when referring to some of these inner qualities that can develop.

Perhaps the real gold is the gold within. If we learn how to connect to this inner gold, we will discover that we have all the gold we need to live a happy and contented life. May your heart be the golden goose. Thank you.