

# Stories - The Monastery Within

May 14, 2021

## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

abbess, monastics, Buddha, holy, hospital, sickness, illness, old age, hospice, dying, death, calm, contentment, peace, practice, catalyst, monk, hut, deer, lion, acceptance, nun, fire, wisdom

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Today I want to tell a few stories from a short storybook I wrote called "The Monastery Within." Many of the stories have to do with the Abbess of the monastery.

In the first story, the Abbess called together all the new monastics, who had been there less than six months. Perhaps, they were starting to get a bit restless or to wonder why they were there. Maybe they had gotten used to the routine and were bored, remembering the allures and pleasures of their lives before the monastery. She said, "Pack your bags because I am going to take you on a pilgrimage to the holy sites of Buddhism."

The new monastics knew about the holy sites in India: where the Buddha was born, where he was enlightened, where he first taught, and where he died. They were considered the holiest places for Theravāda Buddhists. People went there on pilgrimages. The monastics said: "Oh. Great! We are going on a trip." They packed their bags for travel. They climbed onto the monastery bus, and off they went.

First, the Abbess took them to a hospital where they visited the sick. They were surprised by all the different sicknesses that people were struggling with. Some sicknesses were pretty severe. They had a chance to go through the ICU and even the emergency room. It was almost mind-boggling to see the extent of the injuries and illnesses.

They returned to the bus and went to an old age home. The new monastics, most of whom were young, saw the ravages of old age. People could no longer care for themselves. Some could not walk anymore or had decreased capacities. It was pretty impressive for the young monastics to see. They then got back on the bus.

The Abbess took them to a hospice where they saw people in the stages of dying. Some people were afraid of dying; others were disconnected from the whole experience. Some were semi-conscious and not present anymore. There were all kinds of challenging ways of dying. Some had already died. The monastics spent time next to a bed that held a corpse of a recently deceased person.

The Abbess took the new monastics back to the monastery. The monastery had an infirmary where there was an old, sick monk. The monastics spent time with him. He seemed quite tired from his illness, but he was very calm and present. He seemed very engaged in his Buddhist practice, which he had spent years practicing. The monastics could feel the sincerity and intentness of the monk's engagement with his practice. He was just as content to practice in bed as he was anywhere else.

They visited a very old nun, who was ninety-six years old and in a wheelchair. There was a sparkle of joy in her eyes. They looked closer, and it seemed like her eyes were marveling at the mystery and delight of everything. It was almost like she was surprised to be alive. The old nun did not have any fear or regrets. She was content to just be there. This deep contentment was palpable for the new monastics.

They went to the monastery's hospice, where a monk was dying. It was clear that the monk was in some pain, but there was much peace. When they entered the room, it was so peaceful and calm that everyone became quiet. Everyone felt that they should bow deeply. There was something reverent and profound about the presence of this person who had spent decades practicing in the monastery. There was no iota of fear.

The Abbess took the new monastics back to the courtyard. They all sat down under a big tree. The Abbess said: "Now you have seen the sacred sites of Buddhism. Knowing them, practice well. Plunge into the monastic life. Plunge into the practice you have come to do. And you too will become the sacred sites of Buddhism."

This story sacralizes something common – sickness, old age, and death – that can be a catalyst for practicing, for getting to the bottom of what it means to be alive, and to the origins of our suffering. Sickness, old age, and death can also be a catalyst for waking up and finding our freedom and peace.

The second story involves a monk. He was known for having a seemingly deep and peaceful acceptance of life – a deep trust in life itself. One day, the monk went off, away from the others, to the edge of the monastery, where the monastery had a few meditation huts. Monastics would go there to meditate for weeks at a time. While in his hut, the monk heard a deer crash through the woods. It collapsed in a meadow in front of the monk's hut. The deer was clearly injured.

Right behind the deer, there came a lion. "Oh-oh," said the monk. "I guess the deer was attacked by the lion – that's why it is injured. The lion is going to eat it." The lion approached, and the deer seemed completely relaxed and at ease. The deer was just there, like it was almost accepting its condition. The deer could see the lion, but it was not afraid. It did not try to get up and run away. The deer was seemingly just there.

For the next two days, the lion stood guard over the deer to keep it safe from other predators so that it could heal well enough to get up and walk away. That was a very impressive sight for the monk to see. He said: "Oh. This is an affirmation. This is like proof of my practice of deep acceptance of everything. If I just accept life as it really is, then life will provide. The Dharma will provide. Things will arise, but the art of it is to accept."

Some weeks later, a nun came to stay in a nearby hut. For some reason, her hut caught on fire. The monk saw this and said: "Oh. Look at that." At first, it was just a small fire on the roof. Then it got bigger. But because of the monk's deep acceptance of everything – allowing and letting things arise – he only watched the fire with curiosity. He watched it get bigger and bigger.

The monk soon saw the nun come out of her hut and get some water. She tried to put the fire out, getting a little injured in the process. But it was to no avail, and the whole hut quickly burned to the ground in ashes.

After the hut had burned, the monks, nuns, and the Abbess came to see what was going on. The Abbess went to the monk and said, "What happened here?" The monk explained what had happened. The Abbess said, "Why did you not help?" The monk replied: "Well, I was very inspired. I saw how profound it is to just accept things." He then explained what had happened with the deer and the lion.

The Abbess got angry and said: "It is time for you to leave the monastery and return to the world. Sometimes it is important to be the deer and just accept your condition. Other times, it is important to be the lion. So you have to leave. Only come back when you know how to be the lion."

So, naive acceptance. Sometimes we have to accept that we are lions here to protect and care for the world with our strength, power, and abilities. To have a policy of acceptance – just allowing and being at peace with everything – is really to live a truncated life. It denies a whole part of who we are. In a sense, we are both the deer and the lion. Do not be afraid to be either one. But have the wisdom to know which one is appropriate at any time.

May you discover your monastery within – meaning your wisdom inside – your place of practice. May that be a gift you give to the world. Thank you.