

The Turtle in the Flood

This story can be used to teach children the law of karma and the sharing of merit. We offer a Dharma school demonstration at the story's end.

One day a rich man was passing by a lake shore when he met a fisherman who was dangling a big turtle by its tail. The turtle was moving its four legs helplessly and stretching its neck frantically, seeking some way to escape.

The rich man felt sorry for the turtle and asked the fisherman if it was for sale. The fisherman knew that this man was rich, so he demanded one thousand gold coins [\$1000] for the turtle. The rich man thought that it was ridiculous to pay such a high price, but he couldn't endure to see the turtle tortured and killed mercilessly by the fisherman. So he finally agreed to pay the price. He took the turtle from the fisherman and released it in the lake. The turtle was happy to escape with its life and swam around in a circle three times in happiness and finally disappeared into the lake. The rich man watched the antics of the turtle with tears in his eyes and slowly knelt on the sandy beach.

"Poor turtle. He was fortunate to have escaped with his life. But there are thousands and thousands of people who are suffering in this world. How happy would they be and I, too, if all these people could be freed from sorrow. I must train hard to become a Buddha in order to assist them and show them the Way!" He knelt there for a long time in deep meditation.

A few nights later he dreamed a strange dream in which a turtle came to him and advised him to move with a few boats up to a high hill because there was going to be a terrible flood. The turtle then told him that this was his way of repaying the rich man for his kindness. The rich man felt strange because everything in that dream seemed so real and convincing. The next morning he reported this strange dream to the king. The king believed in the rich man's dream and immediately moved his people to the hills. Soon a deluge of rain came and the water rose higher and higher until even the high hill became an island in the water. So, the rich man, having been prepared, moved into his boat.

As he was drifting in the flood, a turtle came to the boat and said: "Don't worry. Just follow me. I will take you to a safe place."

As the rich man rowed and followed the turtle, he saw a snake swimming toward his boat to escape from the torrential flood. The kindly rich man picked up the snake and placed it in his boat. A little later they saw a fox in the water struggling to keep her head above water. The rich man also rescued the fox.

Soon they saw a man in the water shouting for help. The rich man tried to reach the man, but the turtle advised the rich man against it. Perhaps the turtle was remembering how the fisherman had meanly mistreated him.

"Please, sir, I don't trust people. They cheat and lie. They are so selfish that they easily forget even a great favour done for them. I advise you not to save him. I would hate to see you betrayed by him."

"You are an animal. How can you know the ways of human beings? I must help my fellowman." The turtle did not say any more, but hoped that no harmful consequences would result from this act. The struggling man was rescued and they all reached a place of safety.

"I am so happy that I could be of some help to you," said the turtle and went on its way.

The snake and the fox also thanked the rich man and went their separate ways. The fox ran up to the hill looking for a cave as a likely place for her new home. She found an old cave which was once inhabited by people a long time ago. As the fox went into the cave, she found before her a chestful of treasure. The fox, delighted with her find, ran back to the rich man and told him what she had found.

"It must belong to the people who lived there a long time ago. Now that no one lives there, it rightfully belongs to whoever finds it. Please go with me and claim it for yourself. This is the least I can do to repay your kindness in saving my life."

The rich man hesitated awhile. But he thought that if he could claim the treasure and give it away to the people who had lost everything in the flood, everyone would benefit. So he walked to the cave with the fox.

Meanwhile the man who was saved by the rich man was listening and watching and he followed them to the cave. When the rich man came out of the cave with the treasure, the man demanded a half share of the chest for himself. The rich man gave him ten pounds of gold coins [\$100], but the man was not satisfied.

"You stole the treasure. You have committed a crime. If you don't want anyone to know about this, you'd better give me half of the treasure.

Otherwise, I will notify the police.” The man threatening the rich man quite forgot the fact that this rich man had saved his life.

The rich man said calmly, “I am not going to take this for myself. I am going to give it away to the people who were the victims of the flood. I wouldn’t think of taking this for selfish reasons.”

Since the man could not have his own way, he later reported the rich man to the police. The rich man was soon arrested, but he did not make any explanation or protest, practicing patient forbearance like the Buddha. He had trust and confidence in the law of karma to vindicate him and set things right. He meditated and worshipped the Buddha more than ever and wished that all people in the world might rejoice in the great love of the Buddha.

In the meantime, the fox and the snake were shocked to hear about this turn of events and discussed ways to help the rich man.

“We will risk our lives if necessary to get our kind friend out of jail, since he has been accused and imprisoned unjustly.” Both swore to this promise and one night, according to plan, the snake crept into the jail cell with something in its mouth.

“Dear friend, I came here to save you. Here in my mouth I am carrying medicine for snake poison. Now listen carefully. Soon you will hear about someone suffering from a snakebite. At that time please give him this powerful medicine. The patient will recover and you will then be freed from jail without question,” said the snake.

Next day the little crown prince of that country was bitten by a poisonous snake and his life was in great danger. All the doctors in the country were called to the palace but their medicine and treatment could not do much for the little prince. Soon the frantic king issued an emergency order for anyone with medicine for snake poison to come forward. As a reward he offered a high position in his government.

The rich man waiting in the jail heard this news and immediately demanded to see the prince. He was taken to the palace in haste and there he treated the little prince with the medicine given to him by the snake. It was like a miracle. The prince’s critical condition improved rapidly and he was soon well on the way to complete recovery. The king was delighted and immediately ordered that the rich man be released from jail, and called him to the palace to thank him personally.

The king asked how the rich man came to have such a miraculous medicine. The rich man explained everything – about the flood, the treas-

ure, and the snake. The king nodded his head in understanding and said, "I can see now how important it is to be kind and gentle to every living thing as the Buddha taught us. I was blind not to see the truth. I made a great mistake in believing in the selfish man who forgot the favours that other people had done for him. Forgive me for putting such a virtuous man as yourself in jail."

The king appointed this rich man as his chief advisor and with his help ruled the country compassionately and wisely. The king also devoted himself to study of the Buddha's Teaching, and formally became a Buddhist by accepting the Precepts. He became known far and wide as a wise and just Buddhist king. The man who betrayed the rich man was arrested, tried, and sentenced accordingly.



Dharma School Demonstration. Preparation: gather candles (small tapers work best), one for each child, some extras, possibly a couple of larger (thicker) candles, and a large jar capable of extinguishing a taper. Prepare some kind of sconce, such as glass votives, so the children can hold candles without dripping wax on themselves or others. Have ready labels or images of the various characters in the story. Magazine cutouts would work fine. Have on hand copies of "Dedication of Merit," the transfer of merit song from Shasta Abbey that begins, "May every living being...."

Have children sit in circle on floor. Begin with requests for transfers of merit, updating previous list and adding on new names. Explain that the light of the candle is like the light in our hearts. Merit, love, can be shared just like light. It's invisible, so it needs expression, just like our love for our parents needs to be shown by doing something to express it. Light one candle, and from it light one child's candle, again stressing that this represents merit/love being shared. Then allow that child to pick someone else's candle to light, and so forth (two or more people can light one or more others), until all candles are lit. (Watch out for candles igniting long hair.) If desired, sing "Dedication of Merit" at this point. Have children repeat each line after you if they are not familiar with the song. Parents can read words off printed copies. Then go through the song emphasizing the numerous references to light. If children are pre-schoolers, skip this part, as they likely would not have enough concentration to listen to the entire story, which follows. Extinguish candles.

Read *“The Turtle in the Flood.”* Then relight candles one at a time, adhering to each candle the name or a picture of a character in the story as merit is passed on to him or her. An unlit candle represents someone in need of merit. First light the rich man’s candle, one of the large ones – his wealth is a source of great merit. The rich man then lights the turtle’s unlit candle, because the turtle needs help: the rich man saves his life by buying him from the fisherman. Place a jar over the fisherman’s candle, to show how greed and cruelty cause a candle, the light in our hearts, to go out. Emphasize that the rich man does not lose anything by saving the turtle’s life: we don’t diminish our own merit or love by giving them to others.

Next the turtle shares light with the rich man and gives him another candle (even though he doesn’t need it) by warning him about the coming flood. The rich man shares this light with the king (represented by a large candle), who then shares light with everyone in the kingdom. The flood comes. The rich man lights the unlit candles of the snake, the fox, and the other man as he pulls them into the boat and takes them to safety. The fox repays the kindness by giving the rich man another candle, the hidden treasure in the cave. By falsely accusing the rich man of stealing the treasure, the other man extinguishes one or more of the rich man’s candles through his greed and lying. (Note: the rich man’s candle is not destroyed, only extinguished, just as Buddha Nature cannot be destroyed, though we diminish its light.)

The snake and fox join forces to give light back to the rich man by springing him from jail. The king restores all to the rich man by lighting the rest of his candle(s). A dark glass extinguishes the other man’s candle – his light goes out because of greed and lying. (Note that the man’s candle, the Buddha Nature, is still intact; it’s just not burning and expressing the candle’s True Nature.)



“The Turtle in the Flood” is adapted slightly from *Buddhist Stories for Young and Old* by Venerable Sumangalo, First Abbot of Poh Ern Ssu (“Temple of Thanksgiving”) in Singapore. The Venerable was one of the first Western monks in Asia, a friend of Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett, and a strong advocate of Buddhist education for children and young people. He translated and adapted this story from *Rokudojukyō*, Vol. III. It is reproduced here with the kind permission of Mr. Boon S. Lee, Honorary President of Poh Ern Shih Temple. *Buddhist Stories for Young and Old* was first published in 1960. Permission to reproduce this story for personal, non-commercial use is granted. For other uses, please contact Mr. Lee, the copyright holder. Eugene Buddhist Priory, Eugene, OR, USA 2005

