Brian Conroy: The Art of Storytelling
by Brian Conroy

Stepping Stones: Buddhist Parables is the culmination of nearly twenty-five years of reading, writing and telling Buddhist stories. The initial impetus for collecting these stories came in the autumn of 1997 when longtime Buddhist monk, Reverend Heng Sure, asked me to teach a storytelling class at the newly opened Berkeley Buddhist Monastery. An outstanding storyteller himself, Reverend Sure has for decades utilized stories to enliven his Dharma lectures. Knowing that I was a professional storyteller, he urged me to dig deep into the trove of Buddhist tales and restore them to a living, oral tradition where they belong.

Two months later, I began teaching a weekly class in storytelling techniques. With Reverend Sure’s endorsement, the class began with nearly fifty students. After the initial enthusiasm, the class settled into a committed group of ten or twelve storytellers who met once a month. We called ourselves The Buddhist Storytelling Circle.

The Storytelling Circle evolved into a solid collective of storytelling performers. For several years, we told a wide range of Jataka tales, wisdom stories, parables, and international folktales at Buddhist temples and interfaith gatherings. Twice we hosted Buddhist Storytelling Festivals. In 2004, Reverend Sure and I presented a workshop entitled Updating Wisdom Stories at the Parliament for the World’s Religions in Barcelona, Spain to a capacity crowd. More than twenty years later we’re still doing our best to keep wisdom tales alive. The most recent iteration of the Buddhist Storytelling Circle met from the fall of 2018 to spring of 2019.

In August of 2019, the Buddhist Association of China invited Reverend Sure to bring a delegation from our Dharma Realm Buddhist Association to visit some of the important historical monasteries and nunneries in China. I was fortunate to be included as part of the fifteen-member delegation which included five nuns, four monks and six laypeople. The delegation journeyed over fifteen-hundred miles, visiting ancient temples where many of the great sages, Chan Masters and patriarchs had lived.

Before we left for China, I was not given any specific instructions as to what my function would be as a member of the delegation. But I remained open and receptive, hoping my role would reveal itself at some point. After only a few days in China, however, it became clear to me how I could make myself most useful, as everywhere we went I began to hear stories.

Master Zhao Zhou’s Bridge

One of our first stops was Bailin Monastery. Bailin Monastery was first built in the time of the East Han Dynasty (approximately 3rd Century AD) and originally known as Guan Yin Temple. During the Yuan Dynasty (1279-1368), it became known as Bailin Monastery. At
the age of 80, Master Zhao Zhou Congshen, the fifth successor to the Sixth Patriarch Hui Neng, arrived at Guan Yin Monastery and remained there until he attained Nirvana at the age of 120. He is best known for having devised the koan: Does a dog have the Buddha Nature?

Answer: Mu. (Nothingness.)

A mile or so from Bailin Monastery there is a bridge built in the Sui Dynasty that spans the Jiahoe River. Construction of the “rainbow in the sky” began in 595 AD and was completed in 605. The bridge, known as both the Zhao Zhou Bridge and the Anji Bridge, is China’s oldest standing bridge. It was the inspiration for another of Master Zhao Zhou’s koans:

What does the bridge have to do with Chan?

Answer: It crosses over the donkey; it crosses over the horse. (The bridge literally does those things, but in a figurative sense it crosses over all living beings.)

Go Drink Tea

According to the Analects of Chan Master Zhao Zhou, one of his essential teachings was: Go Drink Tea.

One morning Master Zhao Zhou welcomed two novices who had come to study with him. To the first he asked, “Have you been here before?”

“Yes, Master” said the first novice.

“Help yourself to a cup of tea,” said Master Zhao Zhou.

To the second novice he asked the same question. “Have you been here before?”

“No, Master, this is my first visit here.”

“Help yourself to a cup of tea.”

The manager of the monastery wondered why Master Zhao Zhou responded the exact same way to both novices. “Master, you offered a cup of tea to the novice who had been here before, and you also offered a cup of tea to the novice who had not been here before. What is the meaning of this?”

“It’s very simple,” replied Master Zhao Zhou. “Have yourself a cup of tea.”

At every monastery we visited, we were served steaming, hot cups of tea. Upon leaving, nearly every monastery made offerings of tea to the members of the delegation. At Bailin Monastery, in addition to packages of tea, we received an offering of a tea cup with Master Zhao Zhou’s instructions: Chi Cha Qu (Go Eat Tea) running down the length of the cup. Thanks to the kindness of these monasteries, we returned home with a supply of tea that will last most of us for many years. Even after all of the tea is drunk, our instructions will be the same: Go Drink Tea!

Benefitting Living Beings Even in Death

A few days later we visited Zhenru Monastery where Master Empty Cloud, or Hsu
Yun, completed the stillness in 1959. Zhenru Monastery held special significance for our delegation, since our teacher—Master Hsuan Hua—was Master Empty Cloud’s successor.

Before he died, Master Yun asked for his ashes to be mixed with flour, water and sugar and made into seven balls, to then be fed to the fish in a large lake called Xi Hai at the base of the mountain where Zhenru Monastery sits. His fellow monks honored his request. Even after Master Hsu Yun left his flesh body, he continued to benefit living beings.

True Wealth

The next day we visited Guoqing Monastery where Han Shan and Shih Te—two of Buddhism’s tricksters—lived off and on for decades. While walking the grounds of the monastery, one of the Dharma Masters told me a Han Shan story.

Once a wealthy man observed a monk in ragged robes sitting in meditation.

The wealthy man said, “How sad is this poor beggar who owns nothing more than the thin robes upon his back.”

Han Shan overheard this remark. Watching the wealthy man walk away shaking his head in disgust, Han Shan shook his head and said, “One who fills his warehouse with a thousand pieces of gold has less than the poor man who practices meditation.”

After hearing such a wealth of Buddhist folklore within the span of only a few days, I realized how I could make myself useful to the delegation—by documenting the stories of these temples.

When I returned home, beginning with the tales I heard in China as a starting point, I got to work assembling a larger collection of Buddhist parables. I entitled the collection Stepping Stones, the title of a Buddhist parable, as well as a vivid memory of a beautiful pathway of stepping stones we climbed in the Tiantai Mountains. I steered clear of Jataka Tales and koans, since numerous collections of these stories already exist. Instead, I searched for short, wisdom tales that illustrate Buddhist principles. I wanted the stories to be instructive, but not didactic.

When I told my friend Susie Yasui that I was working on a collection of Buddhist stories she asked me a question that served as a guide for this work, “Can you make it so laypeople can understand them?” I’ve tried my best to honor Susie’s request by including stories that are accessible and comprehensible.

Finally, I avoided the obsession of many collectors of Buddhist wisdom tales to explain the moral, the metaphorical implications, the underlying principle of every parable. Not only can that be heavy-handed (and often incorrect), it saps the joy out of the stories, and dilutes their purpose. For that reason, I’ve stayed out of the way and let the stories speak for themselves. It is my hope that these stories are stepping stones on the path to greater understanding.

The Gift of Laughter

During the 9th century, there lived a wandering monk named Putai. Putai was a chubby fellow with a happy disposition. He traveled throughout China with a hemp sack over his shoulder and a huge smile on his face. Most people who saw Putai remembered him
laughing. That’s why they nicknamed him the Laughing Buddha.

Putai’s sack was filled with candy, sweets, and toys. He devoted his life to giving away the gifts in his sack to poor children. It was Putai’s way of practicing empathetic joy—delight in the happiness of others.

Much to his delight, Putai found that the more he gave, the more he had to give. As his reward for giving, as soon as his bag was empty, it was miraculously refilled.

Children loved Putai and were drawn to his playfulness and infectious laughter. But many adults thought he was just a silly, old fool whose time would be better spent doing serious work.

As he traveled from town to town giving his gifts, some people treated him with scorn. One day a farmer scolded Putai, saying, “You shouldn’t give away everything you own to kids who don’t deserve it. You should get something in return.”


Extinguishing the Fire

In a forest at the foot of the Himalayan Mountains, one day a small spark ignited a patch of dry grass. A strong wind came by and spread the fire to the nearby bushes. From there the fire leapt from one tree to the next to the next, so that within a matter of minutes the forest was ablaze.

In one of the trees of this forest lived a tiny quail. She saw the flames and immediately flew to a nearby river. There she dipped her wings in the water, then flew back to the forest and fluttered her wings, sprinkling drops of water on the burning trees. The quail returned to the river again and again, each time bringing with her a few more drops of water, hoping to douse the flames.

The other birds saw this and laughed at the quail. A vulture squawked, “You’re never going to put out a forest fire with a couple drops of water. Give it up!”

“I may not be able to put out the fire all at once,” said the quail. “But I’ll keep trying again and again. Even if it takes this lifetime and the next. You can give up and watch the forest burn if you like, but I’m not afraid to do the long, hard work that will eventually extinguish the fire.”

One Word

Deep in the heart of Silicon Valley there lived a high-strung, high-tech executive who found herself in the midst of a stress-induced meltdown. One afternoon she left work early and drove her Tesla Model S in the fast lane to a Buddhist monastery. There she announced that she was a high-profile CEO who urgently needed the assistance of a Buddhist monk. And before the tech exec could say, “Artificial Intelligence” a Dharma Master was dispatched. No sooner had the executive introduced herself to the monk, than she launched into a fast-paced burst of babbling, without even pausing to breathe.

“Oh, it’s so nice to meet you! I’ve always wanted to meet a real live monk. I came here because I heard that Buddhism can calm a person down...It’s not me so much as the people I work with...See, we’re all very busy people...We have very stressful jobs and
we’re always under pressure to get things done…I mean, some of the people I work with are afraid that if they don't find a way to relieve their stress, they’ll develop some serious psychological disorders...So I was hoping that Buddhism could help me...The problem is, I understand that Buddhist practice requires a time commitment...And unfortunately, I don’t have a lot of free time...So what I want to know is, can you boil Buddhist philosophy down to its essence—maybe even to a single word that will help calm my stress?”

The Dharma Master placed a finger to his lips and whispered, “Shh.”

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