

STORIES FOR WISDOM



Shojo Honda

Illustrated by Piotr Parda

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In Gratitude
to the late Reverend Dr. Yehan Numata

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 FOREWORD 

To develop character when one is young, reading, writing, and mathematics are essential. As well, cultivation through literature, art, and religion is essential, as is developing the body by being physically active. Finally, hearing good stories benefits one's character.

Since it is thus that I believe, I would like to introduce six stories here. These are stories I shared with the children in the Dharma School at Ekoji Buddhist Temple in Virginia. They are drawn from classical tales in Asia and folk stories of various countries. I have revised them in order to make them easier to understand. These stories contain within them precious



messages from voices of the past. In other words, these stories are the fruits of the wisdom of our ancestors, left to us—their descendants—as our inheritance. It would be my great pleasure should you come to acquire the wisdom from these stories.

Suggestions for revisions of the text and illustrations were made by Valorie Lee and Anna Tecson. I thank them so very much.

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THE HUNGRY DONKEY

A hungry donkey came across two piles of hay while walking down a country road. One pile of hay sat on the left side of the road. The other pile of hay was on the right.

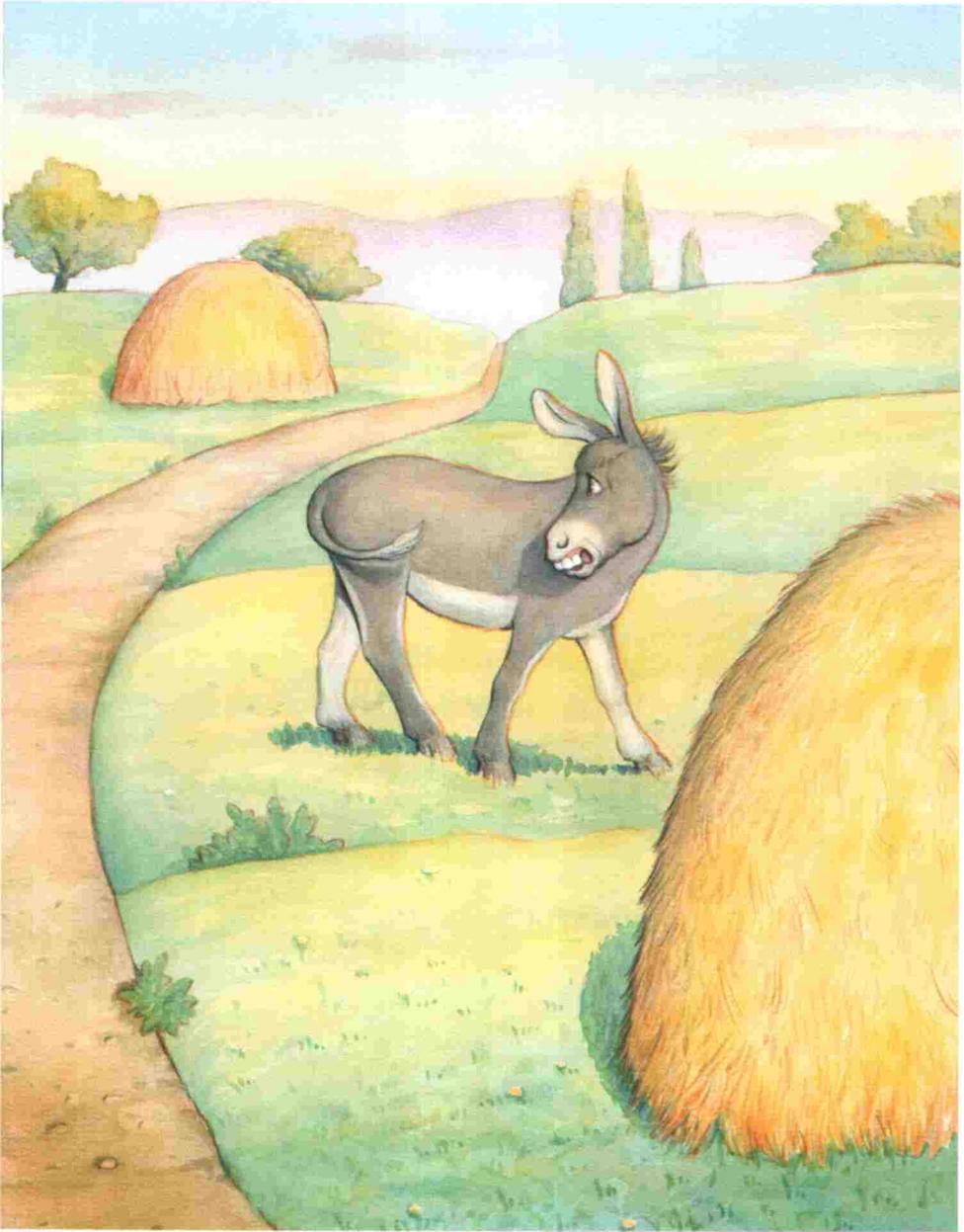
The two piles of hay were about equal in size, and to the donkey, this meant equally tasty. As the hay piles were on opposite sides of the road, he would have to choose between them.

After a quick glance, the donkey thought the pile of hay on the left looked larger, so he started in that direction. Then, turning his nose to the right and sniffing, the donkey thought,

“Yah, but that pile just might be the tastier one.” So the donkey changed his course and instead headed in the other direction.

After a few steps towards the hay pile on the right, the donkey again changed his mind. In fact, the donkey couldn't make up his mind. So again he went left, and again he turned right. After so many turns in each direction, the donkey's legs simply collapsed from under him.

It was not long after that the hungry donkey died—from hunger—right between the two piles of hay.



 This story is also known as “Buridan’s Donkey.” It is believed that this tale was authored by the French philosopher, John Buridan (c 1259—1358), but this has not been absolutely confirmed.

KNOWLEDGE AND WISDOM

Once upon a time lived four men in a country far away. Three of the men were knowledgeable, but somehow lacked wisdom. The fourth man had no formal education and so lacked the knowledge of the other three, but he was especially wise.

One day, the four men were walking through the forest when they happened upon the bones of a lion.

One of the learned men, after carefully examining the bones, skillfully connected them and thereby recreated the lion's skeleton. He pointed to his work with pride.

Seeing this, the second man quickly set to work gathering forest materials. From these materials he made fur and flesh. He then re-assembled the lion's frame by carefully placing the fur and flesh onto the skeleton. He, too, pointed to his work with pride.

The third man, not wanting to be outdone by his peers, stepped forward and announced, "Gentlemen, I shall now attempt to breathe LIFE into this lion."

Upon these words, the wise man tried to stop him, but to no avail. Not only would the others not listen to him, one even remarked that the wise man "held a rather simple and unscientific view of the world of nature and all its creatures".

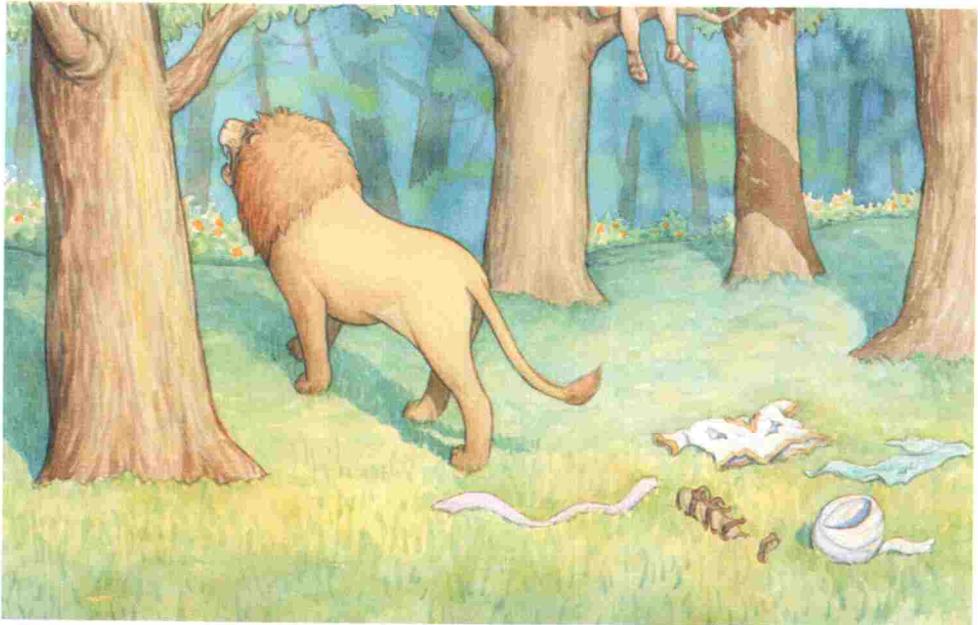
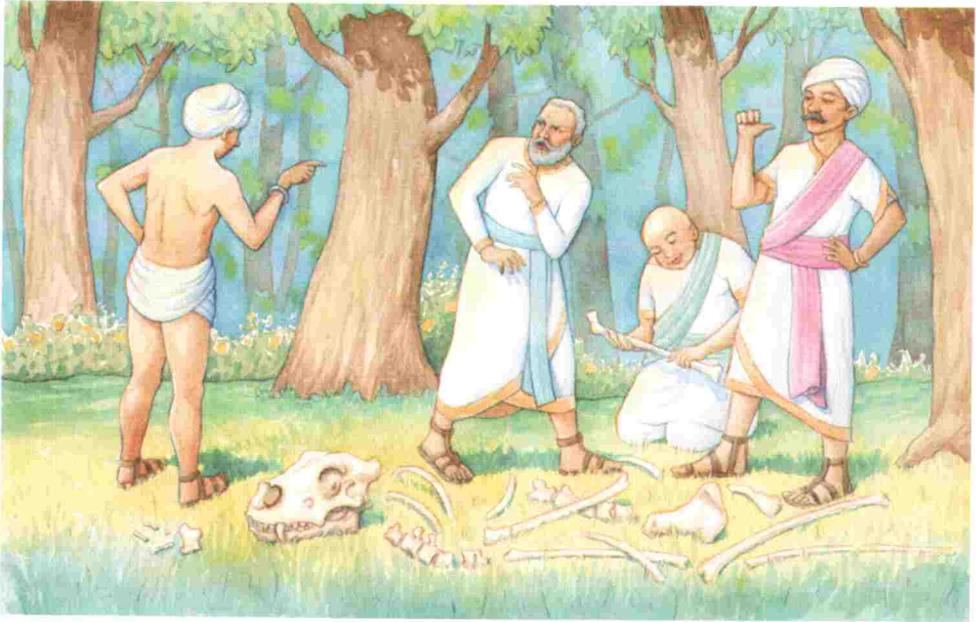
Giving up, the wise man quickly climbed the nearest tree and hid among its thick leaves.

Only minutes later, just as the third man predicted, life returned to the lion with a loud and thunder-like, ROAR!

The three scholarly men cheered in unison and patted each other on the back. They even congratulated one another.

Almost instantly, the lion killed the three men.

It was only the fourth man, the wise one who hid in the tree, who survived that day.



HOW MUCH MORE IS “ENOUGH”?

Once upon a time, in a small town in Japan, lived a young man who was very poor. One day he decided to go to the Shinto shrine in the town and pray to the Shinto god for help.

“Almighty god, you are never too busy to pay attention to the townspeople. As you know, I am an honest and hardworking man but also one who has had no luck. Please take pity on me, and make me a rich man.”

Upon hearing the young man’s wish, a Shinto god emerged from the shrine with this instruction:

“Young man, collect a stone of any size you wish.” The man quickly picked up a stone the size of a peach and held it before the god. “Fine,” the god said, touching his index finger to the stone. In the instant the god touched the stone, it turned into a shiny gold nugget.



The young man was very delighted. He thanked the god and went straight to the center of town. Day in and day out, he spent his money on amusements in the town center.

In a few months, all the money he had was gone, so the man returned to the shrine. He prayed to the Shinto god using the exact same words as before and also asked for the god's mercy.

The god again emerged from the shrine. "Alright, young man, collect a stone of any size you wish." The young man searched the grounds around the shrine and returned with a stone the size of a small melon. The very moment the god touched the stone, it turned into a huge nugget of gold.



The young man was extremely delighted and went straightaway to the town's center. There he lived such an extravagant and luxurious lifestyle that in just a few years, all his money was gone. He returned to the shrine in his old clothes.

Once again the man prayed, and once again the god emerged with the same instructions as twice before. This time though, instead of collecting a stone, the young man matter-of-factly stated, "I thank you, but it is not just a nugget of gold I want this time."

"Oh, indeed," interjected the god. "What more do you want?"

To this question the young man eagerly replied, "What I also want is . . . your index finger."

AN UNHAPPY TSAR AND A HAPPY FARMER

Long ago in Russia, there lived a rich and powerful tsar. The tsar lived in a grand palace where soldiers protected him day and night and hundreds of servants tended to him from morning to evening. The tsar had all that he needed and all that he wanted. All, that is, except happiness. If the truth were told, the tsar had been sad nearly all his life.

One day, a wise old sage was visiting the region. Upon hearing this news, the tsar sent one of his attendants to bring the wise man to his palace.

When they were alone, the tsar revealed to the sage, “I have everything I need and can get anything I want, but I have never in my life been happy. A sad ruler, am I. As you are wise, tell me how to find happiness.”

“Sire,” said the wise man, “try this. Find a single plain shirt belonging to the happiest man in your tsardom, and don it. This should bring you happiness.”

On the following day, the tsar ordered hundreds of his soldiers to look for the happiest man in the country.

One month, then three, then seven months passed, but no such person was found. One year, then three, then seven years passed, but no good news was

delivered to the palace. After ten years, the tsar had not only grown older, but felt even sadder than before.

Then one evening, while passing through an old country village, one of the soldiers came upon a small log cabin. He stopped suddenly upon hearing a voice joyfully exclaim, "How happy I feel, little cat, like the birds in spring! I believe I might be the happiest man in all of Russia."

The soldier immediately knocked on the door and stepped inside the log cabin. There before him, sitting in the dim light of a candle, was an old farmer. He wore a threadbare smock and had no shoes on his feet.

The soldier quickly identified himself and promptly asked, "Do you

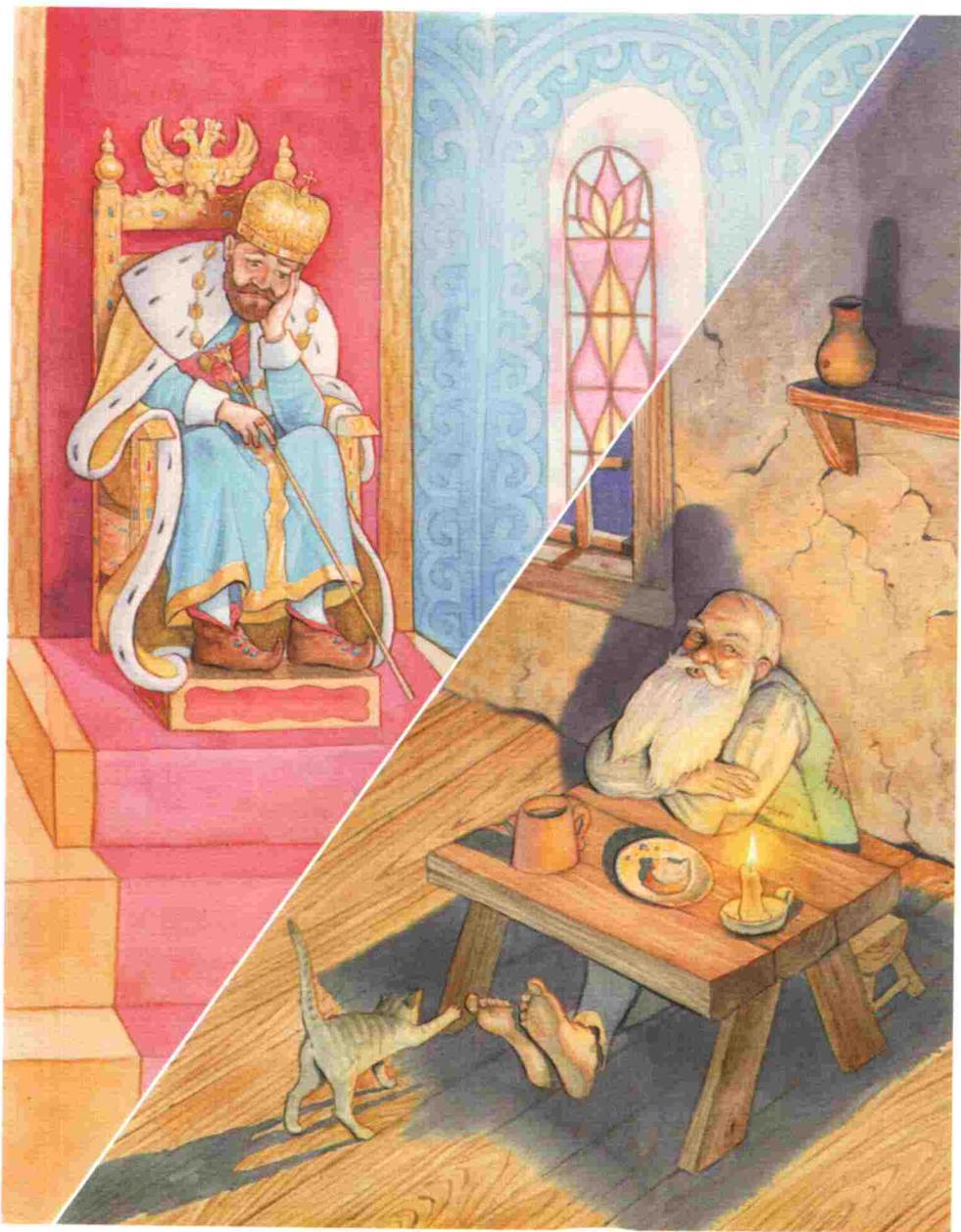
really believe you are the happiest man here in the country?"

"Why yes, at least I feel that way, sir, as if I were the happiest man in all of Russia," repeated the farmer.

"That's wonderful," said the soldier. "Pardon me, but I should like to . . . buy a plain shirt of yours. I can pay you any amount for it."

The farmer thought for a minute before answering the soldier.

"Ah, but I don't own any shirt, sir. All I have is on my back—this old smock. You see sir, I am but a very poor farmer. Frankly speaking, sir, I do not have the means to buy even one single shirt."



A STORY OF A HINDU GOD

Many years ago, in a quiet, peaceful town in India, lived a Hindu god.

The god enjoyed walking through the town square, visiting the bazaar, and strolling along the river. He especially loved to walk in the tranquil forest where the birds sang and sunbeams shone through the trees. In the morning, the forest was very cool. Along the way, the god would be greeted by other gods with “Namaste”.

As time passed, the town where the god lived grew larger and larger. The

streets became very crowded. The bazaar became noisy, and arguments erupted among the townspeople.

The Hindu god was not at all happy. He left the town and hid away on Mount Everest, in the Himalayan Mountains. On Mount Everest, he found his ideal place and there he enjoyed a peaceful life.

Hundreds of years passed by the time the Englishman Edmund Hillary set out to be the first person to climb to the top of Mount Everest. Hillary would eventually succeed in his goal and reach the peak of the highest mountain in the world.

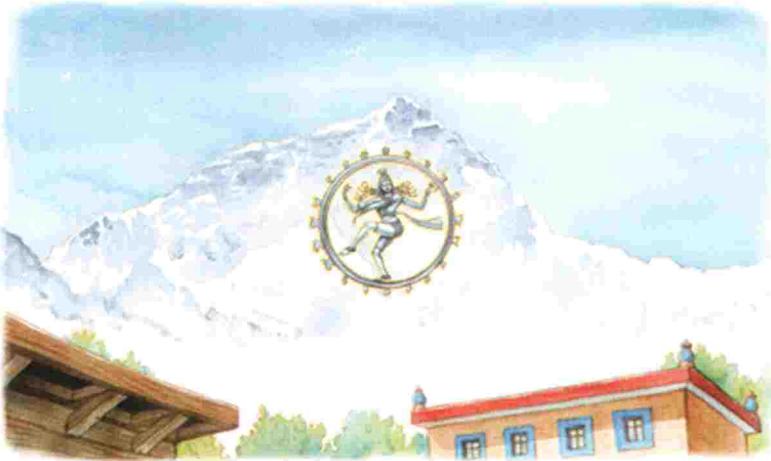
Following Hillary, thousands of mountain climbers the world over

would also scale Mount Everest. On the way back down the mountain, many of these climbers simply left behind what they no longer needed.

In one year alone, volunteers bagged six tons of debris along just a single pathway of the mountain. They collected empty oxygen tanks, tents, cans, hiking boots, leftover food, and other assorted items.

As it was, Mount Everest became so littered with junk that the Hindu god just could not live on the mountain any longer. He had to find a new place to live. So he set out and searched the world over for a new home.

He searched and searched and then, at last, he found the ideal place.



That is, the god decided his new home was inside man himself. He observed that man is too busy looking and seeking and scaling heights outside of himself to look inside. Therefore, inside man he would surely not be seen or disturbed.

So it happened, from that day forward, the townspeople never did see their Hindu god again.

THE PEARL

The story of the Pearl begins high atop the Himalayan Mountains in India.

There, every morning as the sun rises, its rays shine on the tallest mountain and illuminate the snow-covered peak.

One morning, the silver-shiny snowcap on the highest peak blew into the sky and became a cloud. The young cloud started moving westward in the sky right behind other new clouds.

That afternoon, the cloud passed over beautiful foothills, where sheep moved slowly across a grassy plain.

In the early evening, the cloud passed over a still clear lake in the woods, where it saw the moon's reflection in the water.

Later that night, the cloud passed over a tropical island. The palm trees on the beach were whispering to the stars in the night sky.

On the other side of the island, waves chatted and laughed. Their laughter created a gentle breeze across the island.



The very next day, however, the weather grew cold. The cloud began to shiver, and as it did, thousands of raindrops formed. Immediately they began falling towards the ocean below.

Upon seeing the vast ocean, a tiny raindrop cried out, “Oh how great the ocean is and how small am I! I am but nothing compared to this ocean!”

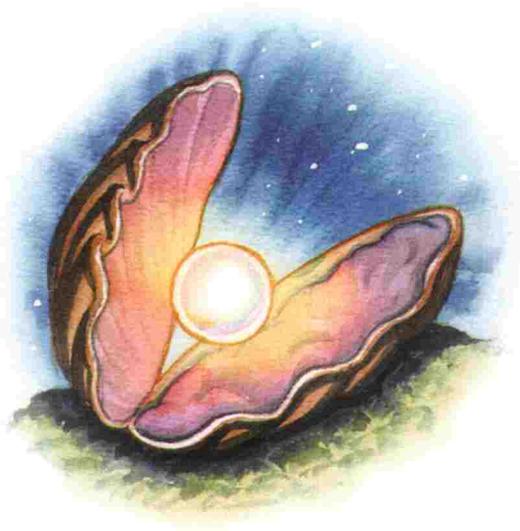
Only, the tiny raindrop could not hold on to the disappearing cloud and fell out of the sky.

At the very bottom of the ocean lived an oyster. The oyster overheard the tiny raindrop and thought, “How very humble it is, that raindrop in the sky.”

When the tiny raindrop finally touched the ocean floor, the oyster

opened its shell and embraced it. Thereafter, the shell was home for the tiny raindrop. The oyster protected and nurtured its young visitor.

Many years passed, and the tiny raindrop became a brilliant pearl.





 ABOUT THE AUTHOR 

Shojo Honda was born in Hawaii in 1929. He was educated at Ryukoku University in Japan and is an ordained Buddhist Minister (Nishi Honganji). He worked at the Library of Congress as a Reference Librarian for thirty years, before retiring in 1991. He currently resides in Springfield, Virginia.