

'Seeking Shelter in a Farm of Immortals'

Told by Dai Buzhang

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Journey to the West, well, Journey to the West, that means reminiscences from a sight-seeing to the west. The story is about a monk from the Tang dynasty, who left China and went to India to fetch the Sacred Scriptures. It was Wu Cheng'en from the great Ming dynasty who penned it down. That work is a kind of fairy tale. The part to be told today is about how the master Tripitaka from Tang and his disciples, four people, along with the horse, altogether five living creatures, were on their way. We have a common saying, see, everybody knows it:

Master and disciples, four people,
along with the horse, altogether five living creatures.
Day after day they marched towards the west.
Day in and day out they hastened towards the west.

They had shaped the course westward!

Today was in the ninth month of the autumn:

Golden winds bring airs so crisp,
drops of jade dew condense in the autumn!

This was the season of the sweet-scented cassia! Oh, how carefree and joyous our travellers felt! Tripitaka and his followers had been on the road all day today, and now the slanting sun was sinking in the west. Soon the Jade Hare [the moon] would ascend in the east. At this time when the ten thousand birds return to their nests, Tripitaka was looking around, but at first glance he didn't see any dwellings around there. Oh, true enough, on this road to the west they had seen mainly forests and few people.

In the storyteller's way of putting it, well, we have some expressions such as:

creepers thick as buckets twined
round the trees,
caterpillars long as shoulder-
poles hanging from the leaves

-- unbelievable nonsense all of it, such as:

stones and bricks would turn
into spirits,
tiles would change into demons!

This is just the kind of stuff that you find in fairy tales. At first glance Tripitaka didn't see any dwellings. R-r-rumble.....rumble.....! And he was getting so hungry. It was time for supper, especially since they had eaten an early lunch.

"Monkey!"

"Venerable Father!"

"Have you noticed that the place is completely deserted in all four directions? This evening you should take advantage of the early hour and try to find a place to lodge, while there is still daylight. You should also beg for a vegetarian meal in order to allay your master's hunger!"

"Yes, I can see it! You must be hungry, too. You are right, it is not easy to find a place after it has become dark. We had better look for a mountain cave or look for a grove, try to find shelter, so that we can at least be safe from wind and rain. Surely it doesn't look like rain! If it is actually going to rain, we are in for trouble; then we had better try to find a place."

"Grunt!.....Elder Brother!"

"What is it?"

"Grunt!.....I have caught sight of something!"

"My goodness! Younger Brother! Are your pig's eyes really able to tell good from bad? Are you able to take care of things? Oh, sure! You do not care about five or six, but when we talk about 'seven' [y/cie', homonym for y/cie' 'to eat'], you do certainly care a lot. Now you are thinking about supper. What have you seen?"

"Grunt!.....Deep in the forest ygrunt y there is a human dwelling!"

Ah ha! Ah ha! The others had not noticed it, and their Buddhist master was, as usual, looking afar and not bothering about the things under his nose. Now they looked around in all directions. Who would have imagined that along the mountain path where they were travelling, there was a pitch-black pine forest; and in the pine forest, dimly between the trees, they discerned some houses. Since there were houses, there must be people. It couldn't have been better!

"Please, Monkey! Hurry up and go to their house!"

"Well, I hope this family has a predestined relationship to Buddhism. If they have a predestined relationship to Buddhism, we can go to their house and bother them for help. We can ask the people of this house to let us have a place to spend the night. If they are willing to give us something to eat, so much the better. If they are not willing to give us something to eat, I can go and beg a vegetarian meal for us at some distant place. You cannot run so fast. But I can ride on the clouds so very rapidly. Never mind if it is one hundred and eight thousand li, I'll make it in one somersault! And then I'll beg for a vegetarian meal and bring back to you. My only reservation is if this family does not have a predestined relationship to Buddhism, and is not going to allow us to step inside their main entrance. Anyhow, now that we have come to a house we are better off. Even if they do not allow us to step inside their main entrance, we can sit down in the doorway of their home, or in the corridor. Anyhow, that is much better than squatting in a grove."

"Well, I had better give you a warning, all three of you, so that you do not scare those people out of their minds when you go to meet them. Other people have no idea, but I know that you are the refined essence of mountains and rivers and wild beasts. Moreover, after you have received benevolent edification from me, your Father, you stick docilely to the path and the rules. However, other people have no idea! When they see you yone of you with a monkey face and a wobbling neck yanother of you looking like a pig yand Friar Sand looking even worse, green-faced and long-toothed, with blue cheeks and red whiskers y if you don't want to scare them, you must try to cover yourself up a bit!"

"Yes! That is quite true! As for myself, being a monkey, although I don't look exactly like a human being, I do have three parts of a human form. But when that pig gets to his feet and begins to talk, he must surely frighten people! y Younger Brother!"

"Grunt!.....Elder Brother!"

"You must be very careful!"

DB[1] "I know."

Pigsy let his head drop on his chest. That long pig's snout was so annoying! He had better try to hide it under the collar of his monk's frock. Phew! Now his pig's snout was hidden. But his two enormous ears were in the way. Flip-flap, flip-flap! Phew! Phew! When he tried to wipe his large ears away, they turned the other way round! Well, he tried to fix them to the back of his head, while he pulled his monk's hat down over his brow so that his eyes glanced down. In this way, at first sight one would hardly notice his unpleasant looks. Friar Sand, however, had to be extremely careful about his blue cheeks and red whiskers. His face, an indigo-blue face, neither black nor green, how awful it looked! Uh! It is impossible for me to describe that colour! But there is one object which looks like this colour: when you see the way a big bell is striped, that's the way he looked. If you say it is black, you find it is green. If you say it is green, you find fine threads of red in it.

Now Friar Sand bent his waist and lowered his head, while he carried their luggage high on his shoulder. Pigsy held the horse. Tripitaka had of course dismounted. Pigsy held the horse. Friar Sand carried the luggage on his shoulder. Tripitaka led the procession. Oh, the way he looked! Such a fair-skinned and plump honourable monk! When he came to other people's homes, he looked very pleasant. Even if those people had no predestined relationship to Buddhism and had no dealings with monks, they surely would find him very pleasant when they saw his looks.

As they entered the forest, they were able to discern the houses of this dwelling, and already when they saw the gables, they could imagine the rest. The gables were furnished with flues for heating. As soon as they saw these gables, they could -- one, two, three -- imagine the rest. This dwelling had a hall and a residential mansion. In front there was a gate-house and thereafter altogether three rows of houses. The houses were not bad at all. Looking at this dwelling, one only had to see the outside to know that these people were not paupers. Are you kidding? No, as soon as one saw the outside of these houses, one could figure out the rest. The appearance of these houses was not bad at all. The walls of the gables were piled up neatly with flat bricks all the way to the roof. When they arrived at the entrance, they saw a towering screen wall and a whitewashed pointed gable, a high and large gate-house with three limestone steps. The large door of the gate was open.

Tripitaka turned towards his three disciples and gave them a meaningful look. Monkey pulled Pigsy and Friar Sand towards the screen wall and let them stand at

the foot of the wall, while Tripitaka began to ascend the sloping base.

Monks need self-respect. Why? Some people are not very happy when they see a monk. Why? If it is in the evening it is a little better. But in the early morning they do not want to see a monk. Why is that so? Because monks have no hair. What do you mean by saying they have no hair? Well, they have no hair, and 'hair' ýthe pronunciation of the word 'hair' is the same sound as the word 'rich' ýand therefore some people say: Woe, if I happen to meet a monk in the early morning ý with no hair ýit means I am not going to be rich. Some people even become angry when they see a monk; they lose their bearings and make associations: when somebody died people are accustomed to invite monks to come to their home and celebrate a Mass for the dead. But without sense or reason people misrepresent this as 'monks pester people with their visits'. That is too bad.

So Tripitaka could not step over the threshold of another family. He stood outside the threshold on the slope with both hands pressed together in salutation. He raised his voice a bit, not too much, and stared at the door hallway, the door lamps, the door benches, the whitewashed screen with six doors in it. The two screen doors to the left were open, a sign that people were at home. Tripitaka did not dare to charge in. He called out:

"Amitabha Buddha! Is there anybody at home?"

After he had called just once, an answer was heard from inside:

"Yes, there is, there is!"

Somebody said yes. Ta-ta-ta! A person came out from the screen in the gate-house. This mansion had three wings. In the middle was the hall of entrance, to the left and right there were buildings. The building in front of them was a gate-house. Oh, that person looked like an old domestic.

How could one guess that? A glance at his clothes was enough to assure one about it. Nowadays it is not so easy to distinguish. When people go out they may dress in almost the same clothes, no matter whether they are scholars or peasants, workers or businessmen, fishermen or woodcutters, tillers or intellectuals, and you cannot easily distinguish them. Some people still stick to the old conventions, and in that case one can see their profession. Other people cannot be distinguished from their looks. Take me, for example, the clothes I wear -- when I stroll along the street, do you think people can guess that I am a storyteller? They can't. But in those former days people were dressed each according to his position. When this old fellow came out, he was wearing a blue silken hat and silk laced boots ýdressed up as a domestic. His age

My goodness he was no youngster! Probably he was around sixty, he could not be much older. If you are much older than that, your employer doesn't want to keep you! If you are much older the master won't keep you, because you are just superfluous and ineffective! This person had probably served in that family for many years. When you saw his appearance oh, sure he was still in good health, with an erect carriage and a protruding chest. His whiskers were white and his eyebrows had whitened a little, too. That didn't matter, because he had a good colour in his face, oh yes, and the sound of his voice would tell you that he was in excellent health. He was far from being decrepit and senile. He still had a stentorian voice. Now he came forward from behind the screen:

"What is your name, please? What is your name, please?"

He cried out for their names. Tripitaka glanced inside. Behind the screen there was a courtyard. It was lighter there. When you stood in front of the gate hall it was quite dark. But Tripitaka and the old man stood in a lighter place.

DB[2] "Oh, you are actually a venerable monk!"

"I don't deserve it! Amitabha Buddha! My dear benefactor!"

"Oh, ha, ha, ha! I can hear from your accent that you are not from these parts!"

While the old man said this, he stepped over the threshold. He stepped over the threshold of the screen door, and came out. He came out to receive them at the main door, and as he talked, he walked along.

"Yes, you are right, you are right, grandfather, we are monks who have come here from the eastern countries of the great Tang dynasty."

"I see, so you have come from China? Indeed, it is a long way over distant mountains. It is not easy to travel along that road. Deep in the mountains there are demons and in the caves there are evil spirits, my goodness, these demons are playing their tricks everywhere, according to all the rumours. It is really not peaceful at all. How difficult it must be to cross those towering mountains and peaks, and the great rivers, and then there are jackals and wolves, tigers and leopards. Truly, you monks must have suffered hardships. What brings you here?"

"We should never have arrived at your honourable house, if it were not that we have received the holy command from our Tang Emperor to go to India in the Western Regions and visit our Buddha Tathagata and fetch the Sacred Scriptures."

"Oh, you are travelling to India! Ah ha! Is Your Honour coming to our door to call on somebody or to ask about the road? Is it that you do not know the road? Or is it that you have some friends here?"

"Not so!"

"Oh, it is not the case! Well, well!"

"At the present time it is not early in the day!"

"Sure, it is not early in the day!"

"We monks are now suffering from hunger."

"Oh, you are hungry!"

"We do not know where we can find a good place to rest, and we have not caught sight of a convent or monastery. There is nowhere we can beg alms, and we don't see any hostels or inns. Ahead of us we don't find any place to spend the night, therefore we thought we would first approach your residence to beg for a night's lodging. We do not expect a lofty mansion with large rooms, and neither do we need a raised bed or a large berth. We merely hope for a place where we can escape wind and rain, for example just inside this gate hall, just some place to stay. If you will favour us with a meal of wine and food, that will serve us monks as alms for supper. If you cannot, we monks will think of another way out."

"Oh, of course, of course! However, Your Highness must consider that I am only a subordinate here. I cannot make any decisions. Please, Father, take a seat and wait a little while on the bench at the door. Then I'll go and tell my master. My master will surely agree, though. This family has actually a predestined relationship to Buddhism. Yes, they have a predestined relationship to Buddhism. There have never been any problems whenever a monk passes by. You, Father, are coming from China, a long way over distant mountains, and now you are going to the Western Regions to fetch the Scriptures. You are really a living Buddha!"

"Oh, Amitabha Buddha, I don't deserve it, I don't deserve it!"

"Please, take a seat on the bench at the door, if you don't mind!"

"Thank you, thank you! That means I am going to disturb your honourable residence."

"No, no, it doesn't matter. Please come in and sit down, come in and sit down. Outside eh ... ?"

"Well, those outside are my three young disciples."

"Oh, you also have three disciples, and you have a horse and luggage. Surely you are making a long journey, of course you must bring a few things along. Please let them come inside and sit down together with you, that doesn't matter. Let them come inside and sit down a while with you, that doesn't matter. Hello, granny!"

"Hello!"

As soon as he called out, an old lady came out from the gate-house. That old lady came out.

"Hey, please go and tell the master. Say that so and so ... Have you heard it?"

"I have heard it!"

"Well, if you have heard it, then, please, go and tell them. Have a look, a loo ... loo ... a look at the master, how we are supposed to handle this case. You go and have a look, you go and have a look!"

Then they could see this old granny leave the gate-house and go inside. Tripitaka thought he would try not to scare the old man:

"Grandfather, my three stupid disciples are not born by human parents, they are concentrated essence of nature."

"My goodness! Demons ... "

"Well, after they have received my beneficent education and have decided to observe the rules and regulations, you shouldn't fear anything, grandfather!"

"Oh, when you say so, I understand, I understand, I understand! You may bind the horse at the screen wall. There is a ring to which you can bind the horse. You can bind it to the ring and come back. Then my master will have made arrangements, and after that I'll bring the horse to the manger in the rear. If we bring it in through this main entrance, it is actually not so convenient to let it go this way. If, for instance, the horse pisses or shits, that's a nuisance. If you go to the rear of this eastern gable of our farm, there we have an extra courtyard and behind it you find the rear manger. In our farm we also keep cattle. In our farm we don't have such a big horse with a high neck, but we do have big mules and donkeys in the rear yard. Afterwards I'll lead your horse over there. Will you gentlemen carry your luggage over here and sit down on the bench here at the door?"

"Thank you very much, grandfather!"

"Well, not at all! Not at all! It's quite all right, quite all right!"

Tripitaka sat down on the bench to the left of the door and his three younger brothers sat down on the bench to the right of the door. The shoulder pole with their large weight of luggage had been put down beside them.

After a little while the old granny called out from inside:

"Old man!"

"Yes, what did they say?"

"Ask them to come inside and sit down in the hall! The kitchen has already received orders to prepare supper, to make a vegetarian meal!"

"Well, that's fine, it's fine! y Venerable Father, did you hear this? It is just as I said, our family head has originally a predestined relationship with Buddhism. Now they are preparing a vegetarian meal in the kitchen, they know that monks eat vegetarian food. Will you please DB[3] come inside and sit down?"

"Thank you very much, grandfather!"

The old man accompanied the four of them, master and disciples, and Friar Sand lifted up his burden on to his shoulder again. First they went inside the screen, then round the ancestral temple, then again through a courtyard and once more through a door yand there was the great hall! Tripitaka looked around in the great hall. At this time one could still see the hall clearly, it had not become too late yet. In the hall there were hanging scrolls of landscapes and calligraphy, really not bad at all! The corridors were also very spacious. Just opposite, along the screen in the rear, there was a raised kang [heatable brick bed] with a brilliant red kang mat and brilliant red kang cushions. On both sides there were placed four chairs and two tea tables. As Tripitaka entered he admonished his disciples: They should not conduct themselves sloppily. The large burden of luggage was left at the entrance, and all four of them, master and disciples, stepped forwards. The old man said:

"Please, take a seat, I'll make the tea!"

The old man was busy entertaining the guests. Master Tripitaka and his disciples, the four of them, sat down on the four chairs. As soon as they were seated, the tea arrived.

"Venerable Father, please have some tea!"

"Oh, that's excellent, excellent! Thanks a lot, thanks a lot!"

Why did the master of the house not appear? You cannot let your servants do all the talking!

Suddenly there was a sound behind the screen: Tic-tac, tic-tac, tic-tac.....What kind of trick was that? It was the sound of steps. As soon as Tripitaka heard it [he knew]: It came from a female, it was a woman's sound. When you heard the sound of these steps, you could guess what it was: Tic-tac, tic-tac, tic-tic-tac. Probably the sound of high-heeled shoes? Oh, no, at that time they didn't have high-heeled shoes. At that time they had bound feet. When the women walked on their bound feet, they didn't touch the ground properly, there was no force in their step. Therefore when they had their shoes made, a small piece of wood was attached under the heel. You

who are advanced in years, you ladies and gentlemen who listen to the storytelling, in case you are seventy or eighty, or like me, more than sixty, then maybe you have seen this. But our young friends have not seen this.

The floor of her house was laid with chequered bricks. Beneath this kind of bricks there was filled coarse pottery. It was hollow, so that when one walked on the floor there was an echo: Tic-tac, tic-tac, tic-tic-tac.

Well, now they had heard the sound of her steps, but before they had seen her in person, her voice could be heard. They heard at once that this was a female voice, so charming and sweet:

"My goodness, who are these people that have arrived at a widow's door?"

Why, this was not only a woman, but she didn't even have a husband to boot! Already before she had appeared, she had presented herself: Who were they to come to her, a widow's door? Tripitaka hurriedly rose to his feet. As soon as Tripitaka rose to his feet, his three disciples naturally also rose to their feet immediately. They did have just a smattering of manners, after all.

Ah, now somebody came out from the cabinet behind the screen, a middle-aged Xu Niang [a beauty of mature age], with all her charm intact, a lady in her forties. Oh, she was very beautiful! Ho, ho, she was actually not too long, and not too short, not too fat and not too slim. It doesn't matter if they are a little on the plump side! Well, well! When Tripitaka saw her, he stepped forward in all haste and saluted:

"Amitabha Buddha! Bodhisattva! I, a monk, greet you, Bodhisattva, 'joining my ten!'" [Y: yí/he' se', join the ten fingers in salutation]

What? 'Fitting'? [Y: yí/he' se', to fit, be a suitable partner] To speak to a lady and call oneself 'fitting' yí 'fitting', 'fitting'yí that doesn't sound proper! No, no, this was a polite phrase used by monks for greeting people. We who are lay folk call it 'to bow with hands clasped'. But the monks call it 'five plus five yí join the ten', or it is called 'to greet', that's just simply to bow to someone. Well, the lady reacted in a very polite way, this lady really had manners, so she didn't play with the word 'ten together' [sounding like 'fitting']. She was playing with some plans of 'thousandfold happiness'. She seemed to be trying to fish something out of her pocket:

"My goodness, Venerable Father, I don't deserve it, I don't deserve it! Let me return your kindness! Please, Venerable Father, come and sit down!"

"Please, Bodhisattva, please!"

"Please, Venerable Father, please sit down! Please come up here and sit down, Venerable Father!"

At the moment when she said this, the Tang priest was already seated on one of the four chairs. So she wanted to invite him to come up and sit on the kang. What about Tripitaka? Oh, he couldn't do that. What would it look like if he, a monk, would place himself up there?

"Oh no, I wouldn't dare to, dear Bodhisattva, that would be an exaggeration. We monks like to be more informal, a little bit more informal!"

"Venerable Father, in that case, 'it's better to obey orders than to stand on ceremony', please, sit down!"

The Tang priest sat down once more. When the Tang priest sat down, his three disciples also sat down. Tripitaka did not introduce them, as you understand. It was far better that those three disciples were sitting there with their backs bent. If they lifted their heads in a greeting, they might arouse suspicion. It was better not to bring it up. The lady stepped on to the upper kang and sat down. That old man of her house gaily and quickly served her tea. Her guests were drinking tea, so she would of course also drink tea.

"Venerable Father, what is your honourable name?"

"Amitabha Buddha! Dear Bodhisattva, we monks who have left the mundane world normally don't use our secular names. My secular name is Chen and my given name is Jiangliu. After I left the mundane world my Buddhist name is Xuan Zang."

"Oh, how elegant!"

"I have not inquired about your honourable name, my dear Bodhisattva?"

"Oh, my maiden name is Jia [a pun on jia, 'false'] and I was married to a husband by name Ma. So the house of Jia was fitted to the house of Ma, becoming Jia-Ma, Jia-Ma [a pun on 'mess']."

"Well, well, sure, sure!"

Why did she talk with such a double tongue? The house of Jia was fitted to the house of Ma ...

DB[4]

"Venerable Father, a moment ago I heard the old maid of our house tell that you have come from the great Tang dynasty?"

"Quite so!"

"Oh, you have made light of travelling a thousand li and have come from the Southern Continent of Vision all the way to the Western Continent of Cattle-gift. This is what they say -- we have never left home for such a long journey, you see -- so they say the road is one hundred and eight thousand li long!"

"Quite so!"

"You must have suffered hardships!"

"Really, my dear Bodhisattva, I have received the holy command from our Tang Emperor to go and visit our Buddha Tathagata and fetch the Sacred Scriptures. How can one speak of this as 'suffering hardships'?"

"You are right! Since you are doing this for your own sake, one cannot speak of suffering hardship. My Venerable Father, are you forty this year?"

"Ahem! ... "

The Tang priest thought: 'We were talking about worldly matters, asking each other about our honourable names, and that should be enough! Then you begin to ask where we come from and where we are going, which you already know very well. And then you ask me if I am forty or even more this year. Maybe I look somewhat younger? That's not likely. Along the road we have dined on the wind and slept on the dew. Along the road we have put on the moon as our hat and wrapped ourselves in the stars. We have been blown along by the wind, lashed by the rain and burnt by the sun. My face is probably not so plump and smooth-skinned any more! Since she keeps talking that way, I have no alternative but to ... '

"This monk is forty-two this year!"

"Oh, forty-two! Since you are forty-two, we are born in the same year!"

"Oh, sure!"

'Nobody is trying to marry you, why do you say all this nonsense?'

"Venerable Father, since we talk about it, I do have a delicate matter on my mind."

'Nobody is asking you about your delicate matter. The reason why we have come to your home is to have supper and sleep! Couldn't you be a little more polite! Tomorrow we shall just want to eat breakfast. When we have had breakfast, that means we have had a night's sleep and two meals, and then we shall travel on. When you talk to us about domestic trivia, you do not speak about things one should speak with monks about. It is not proper for a lady of your kind, especially a widow, to talk to me about such worldly matters. And to speak about such household concerns is really bad manners. You have already told us that there is no man in the house. There is no need to ask about that. From behind the screen you said: "Who are these people that have arrived at a widow's door?" A widow!'

"Oh, sure, sure!"

Tripitaka didn't know better than to say 'sure, sure, sure' all the time

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