Seven Horses in a Forest

Thousands of years ago in Tibet, an ancient religion thrived around the mountain known to some as Kang Tise and to others as Kailas or Kang Rinpoche. The religion practiced compassion and good deeds, and tried to erase ignorance from people’s minds. It was called Bön, and was the religion of the great Zhang Zhung empire which ruled over a vast stretch of the ancient Silk Road.

A greatly compassionate prince named Tonpa Shenrab was born into the Zhang Zhung empire. He was destined to be a great leader of the Bönpo. He had arrived to lead humans away from suffering. He saw people sacrificing animals to the good and evil spirits of the land. The animals bleated with terror before dying, and that filled his heart with sadness. So he taught the people compassion.

‘Instead of offering the life of a sheep, offer a sheep made from dough. Instead of offering blood, offer milk,’ he said. It took time and patience for him to convince the people, but when people truly understood the value of compassion, they followed him. Tonpa Shenrab became a beacon of bright light in a land darkened by violence and ignorance.

But darkness also has its worshippers. Gods, demons and kings need the praise and fear of ordinary people, otherwise they grow weak. Gods spreading kindness grow powerful only if people believe in what they preach.
Similarly, demons spreading fear can grow stronger only if people fear them.

Chapba Lakring, the demon king of a place called Kong, far from Kailas, was the opposite of Tonpa Shenrab: he ruled over his people by controlling everything in their lives. He created trouble for people who didn’t worship him, and rewarded only those who sacrificed animals to him or offered gold and jewels. Nobody was free to choose if they wanted to follow him, because only he could give them grains, cloths and medicine.

When Chapba Lakring heard that Tonpa Shenrab taught about truth, kindness and beauty, he was very upset. People who understand compassion and beauty treat each other with respect, because of which fear in society decreases. But fear was the strength of the demon king. Worried that he would lose power, he came to Kailas to attack Tonpa Shenrab.

He spread mistrust, greed, jealousy, anger, lies, arrogance, disobedience, and laziness among the people to lead them away from the light of compassion shown by Tonpa Shenrab. But the people had already understood Tonpa Shenrab’s teachings, so his tricks failed.

Chapba Lakring commanded his army of a million demons, who were always intoxicated with power, to destroy Tonpa Shenrab. When the demons attacked, Tonpa Shenrab showed them compassion and shared his wisdom with them. The demons, who were humans distorted by arrogance and ignorance, gave up their weapons and became peaceful shepherds and traders. They followed Tonpa Shenrab as he traveled even farther to spread the light of compassion.

But the demon king’s anger hadn’t disappeared. Evil thoughts buzzed around him like flies around rotting flesh.
One day, when Tonpa Shenrab was traveling around the Cha area to bring the light of compassion to even more people, Chapba Lakring entered his tent as a tired traveler and asked the women inside for water and porridge.

He praised one woman’s beauty and the fine weaving skills of another. He whispered into the ear of one wife to make her jealous of another wife. He put suspicion in the heart of the mother and anger in the mind of the daughter. In this manner, with magical ropes made of clever words, he captured the women and took them away with him.

Tonpa Shenrab returned to find his tent empty. No fire had been lit, no incense had been offered to the ancestors, and the wind passed right through without permission. He flew to Chapba Lakring’s kingdom and with words of logic and the light of compassion took away the evil thoughts and deeds that had tied the women to the demon king. Before traveling back, Tonpa Shenrab and the women prayed that Chapba Lakring would abandon evil.

Ignorance is stubborn. Chapba Lakring was like a man who wants to race over a mountain while covering his eyes with his own hands. Quarreling gave him pleasure and made him feel alive and strong. So he ran ahead to Tonpa Shenrab’s pastures and stole seven beautiful horses and fled to a place called Gongbu.

Tonpa Shenrab understood that unless he showed Chapba Lakring the light of compassion, the fighting would never end. So he traveled to the place where Chapba Lakring hid. The demon king saw the prince of light approach Gongbu and transformed the horses into trees and hid them in a thick forest.

But Tonpa Shenrab possessed eyes of wisdom, so he correctly recognized the seven trees that were his horses. Once the lie was caught, people shook their heads and
wondered why they had seen the horses as trees. The roots of the trees became hooves, the mossy trunks became the shiny coats of fine horses, and instead of nodding in the wind the horses snorted and neighed.

Chapba Lakring was defeated again. He roared in fury and turned the sky black. The valley became a churning sea of fog. Chapba Lakring quickly stole the horses back from Tonpa Shenrab and hid them under a large red rock and spread thick darkness over everything. Nobody could see anything.

Tonpa Shenrab meditated and asked himself: ‘Until when should someone be patient?’ The answer was clear: if being patient allowed another person to continue being an ignorant sinner, patience is no longer good. Out of compassion for the people who lived in fear of the demon king, Tonpa Shenrab created a bright white light and the darkness disappeared completely.

Even though the brightness of Tonpa Shenrab’s light blinded him, Chapba Lakring transformed himself into a black mountain and leapt on Tonpa Shenrab with the intention to crush him into a red paste of blood, bones and hair. Tonpa Shenrab took the form of an even larger mountain with the ability to heal the body and the mind and softly covered the black mountain that was Chapba Lakring.

When the weight of compassion smothered him, Chapba Lakring turned himself into a rain of rocks, which Tonpa Shenrab scattered by dancing with a gleaming, bright sword. The demon king’s attacks were defeated one by one by Tonpa Shenrab’s great compassion. Finally, he collapsed and became Bonri Chinbu, the sacred mountain.

The people of Tibet saw that compassion is more powerful than weapons, and that tolerance and kindness outlive fear and tyranny. Since this great battle between
Folk Gods

Chapba Lakring and Tonpa Shenrab, many evil forces have tried to defeat compassion. But even today, new Bönpo monasteries are being built in Tibet, and kindness is alive all over the world.