

HOW THE UNNECESSARY ELDERLY BECAME NECESSARY

Once there was a king in a certain place. He oppressed the subjects under him with various taxes. Especially, he issued a terrible command that when all old people had reached their final year of life and were of no benefit to the realm or their families, they must be put into a basket and banished to the wilderness by their descendants, even though they might be their own parents. Everyone—male, female, old and young—cursed him, calling him the ‘Ferocious King.’

In a valley there was an old couple of the household called Dargye who were happy to be kind and to help all their neighbors, and whom everyone was said to respect. One time, because their son had a broken arm, they kindly said, “Son, it’s said that morning is a time when one depends on parents, evening a time when one depends on children. One must be an uncle to the big and a help to the small; and if those that have reached their final years are like one’s parents, if you serve all, you’ll get good merit. When we get to our final years you must watch to see whether the young are happy or not.”

So years and months passed by imperceptibly, and the old man Dargye turned more than sixty, the necessity of old age—the finality of birth, death and old age—being irreversible characteristics of nature. The shadow of old age covered his face, his body was bent down, and the strength of his limbs was finished. He was no help to his family and what befell him was the like the saying ‘When one gets old, one sits down in the kitchen’.

Despite the fact that he was his own son, unable to exchange his father’s life for his own, the son, fearing the king’s punishment, wove a basket out of many twigs and tearfully said to his father, “Now you’re old, The king’s command is powerful. There are many who are doing this deed wherever the place. Tomorrow I’ll take you to a distant place.” His father was resigned. He said, “All worldly deeds are like this. When I was young I ran hither and thither for the sake of my family and worldly purposes, not daring to use for myself even a little wealth meant for salaries, servants and retinue, and I supported my household. Now in my final year, unwilling to close my eyes or stop my breath, I’ll finally be brought to a graveyard. Isn’t this what people say of the world everywhere under the sky? Is blue heaven blind?” With falling tears and sighs, sleep did not come the entire night.

The next day, when the sun’s rays struck the mountain tops, the son put his father into the basket and they got to a wilderness. Then, he discarded his father with the basket, and when he was going back, his father said, “Son, the time for suffering is over. Take the basket back! When you get old and reach my age, you’ll need this basket too.” The son felt immeasurably compassionate and sad. He said, “Father, don’t suffer. I’ll take care of you as long as you live.” Without anyone seeing, he hid him in his own home for several years.

One day, a retainer heard a creak and a thud in the king’s treasury. The king got very angry and went to take a look with some retainers. When they opened the door and looked, they saw in the upper part a fearsome creature about the size of a yak that they had never seen before, so they quickly locked the door. Everyone shook with fright. Whoever looked did not know what creature it was and the king commanded, “My retinue, listen! There’s a big, terrifying creature in my treasury. I’ll reward whoever defeats or recognizes it.”

The son heard this and told his father. The father said, "It's impossible for any creature to be in the king's treasury other than a mouse. Tomorrow, take Cat, remove the lattice of the treasury's window and watch carefully!" The next day he did so and watched. The creature ran up and down without finding a bolt hole. Cat looked from between the window-lattices, raising its eyebrows many times, and when the son came back he told his father, who said, "It's definitely a mouse. Confidently guarantee that you recognize the creature and there will be no error."

According to these instructions, the son made a guarantee to the king, saying, "I know." The king asked, "In your opinion, what is it?" "It's a mouse." "How do you know?" "I can show you firsthand." He took Cat and put it in the treasury. Everybody watched and Cat bit the yak-sized mouse on the head and killed it. The king was glad about that and asked him how his reasoning had come about. He told the king, "Unnecessary old people became necessary."

From then on they had to care for old people well for as long as they lived. Saying one was not allowed to act in accordance with the previous custom, not only was the king relieved, but gave the son many rewards and made him content.

—'Jigs med tshe ring & Bande Tshe ring, *Qinghai Folk Literature* 1, 1985