

## A FAITHFUL DOG

Dbang 'dus sgrol ma དབང་འདུས་སྐྱོལ་མ། (Wende Zhuoma 文德卓玛)

In a time, incomparably long ago during an era as old as the stars and as long as the rivers, there was a king named A thos, who was renowned for his kindness and courage. The land he ruled was prosperous and peaceful. However, one year a disastrous drought struck and thousands of people died of famine.

As an old granny told this story, she poured milk from a little bowl onto the head of a dog called Sbu ra. It was the first day of Lo sar - 'Tibetan New Year'.

A little boy named Tshe bzang knelt by the old granny.

Granny intoned, "Spro lo! Spro lo!" for the dog, poured a last drop of milk on Sbu ra's head, and continued her story:

King A thos decided to look for grain seeds from the great Ri bdag, the mountain guard, who lived in a very distant land. King A thos climbed over ninety-nine snow-peaked mountains and crossed ninety-nine rushing river torrents before finally reaching his destination. He respectfully prostrated to the great mountain guard and asked for some grain seeds.

However, the great mountain guard, with a beard as long as a waterfall and as thick as yak wool, sadly shook his head and told A thos that a greedy, evil snake controlled all the grain seeds. He also warned King A thos that the evil snake would turn anyone into a dog who came to his place for seeds.

When King A thos insisted on obtaining seeds for his people, the great mountain guard gave him a wind-ball and told him to put it in his mouth.

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King A thos soon reached the dark cave of the evil snake and quietly crawled inside. A bright yellow light emanating from the precious seeds twinkled at the deep end of the cave.

The evil snake lay beside the seeds. Just as King A thos was about to put some seeds into his bag, the movement of his hand awakened the sensitive, evil snake who gave a puff of air that turned King A thos into a dog.

Unbothered, King A thos quickly rolled around in the seeds and fled. The evil snake could not catch him because the king was running as fast as the wind with the wind ball in his mouth.

King A thos was delighted with the seeds caught in his tangled hair, and began the journey back to his kingdom. Strong wind blew away some of the seeds, heavy storms meant he lost more seeds, and when he was crossing the ninety-ninth river, the rapid current washed away all the remaining seeds except for one on the end of his tail that he kept high in the air.

Since then, we have had barley in Tibetan areas so it was the dog who brought us food, and now it is the dog who guards us against danger. This is why we must offer the first bit of food to dogs on the very first day of Lo sar.

As Granny concluded her story, she gently stroked Sbu ra.

For the first time, Tshe bzung felt grateful and reverence for Sbu ra, who was strong, black, and covered with thick hair. He could not remember the day Sbu ra was brought to his home, but he had vivid memories of businessmen coming to his home, asking how much it would take to purchase Sbu ra.

Very early the next morning just as Tshe bzung woke up from a dream, he heard a vehicle stop at their house. It was his uncle.

His uncle had become very wealthy buying and selling Tibetan mastiffs at a time when the dogs sold for very high prices - even stray dogs from the streets and the corners of *ma Ni* piles vanished.

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His uncle had a very long talk with Tshe bzang's father and in the afternoon, Sbu ra was tied and put in the back of his uncle's vehicle. Then they sped away.

Later it was said that Sbu ra was used for breeding purpose, and that he might never return to Tshe bzang's family.

Three years later, Tshe bzang's uncle returned with Sbu ra. He had lost all his money in the mastiff business.

Tshe bzang's grandmother complained that dogs were sacred beings and doing business in sacred beings would surely lead to misfortune.

Another three years passed and Tshe bzang observed increasing numbers of abandoned mastiffs roaming around towns and monasteries. The collapse of the mastiff business meant that the number of strays rapidly increased - stray mastiffs now seemed as plentiful as Plateau pikas.

These strays suffered from hunger and disease, and fought each other over bits of food.

Stray dog attacks became such a serious security issue that some suggested killing them. As these old memories flashed in his mind, Tshe bzang was glad his uncle had brought Sbu ra back home and had not abandoned him in an uninhabited area nor in a distant street corner.

Tshe bzang was very fond of Sbu ra. He played with him and fed him meat. Each time Tshe bzang went to school, Sbu ra would escort him for some distance and when he returned from school, Sbu ra ran to him, his tail wagging in the air and sniffing around his legs.

Caterpillar fungus season came and students were given time off to collect these precious herbs that provided the main part of local families' income. One early morning on the first day of collecting caterpillar fungus, Tshe bzang's family hurried to distant mountains in the company of hundreds of other villagers. Sbu ra came too, despite Tshe bzang's efforts to chase him back home. Tshe bzang enjoyed the fresh warmth of this sunny day, the vast expanse of the

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flower-bejeweled mountains. Moreover, Sbu ra was with him and he could play with him.

As the day wore on and the sunshine grew stronger, Tshe bzang and his family stopped for a simple lunch, and then everyone stood up and scattered like dandelion seeds in the wind. Tshe bzang was the last to finish his lunch of *rtsam pa* and meat, a bit of which he fed Sbu ra.

He took out a white cloth from his shirt pocket and unfolded it carefully to reveal eleven caterpillar fungus. This number was less than others, who already collected between thirty to one hundred pieces. He carefully folded the cloth, leaned back, and squinted in the bright sunlight at a sky as blue as a Plateau lake. Sbu ra lay beside him with his tongue out, which slithered from side to side in his mouth, as he lazily blinked his eyes.

Feeling tired and sleepy after lunch, Tshe bzang gazed at the mountains beyond, which seemed far and unreachable. He wondered if there were more caterpillar fungus on the other side of the mountain and decided to walk there.

Sbu ra followed, lagging about fifteen steps behind him. As they marched further ahead, the sounds of people talking and laughing became indistinct and finally vanished.

Tshe bzang found several caterpillar fungus on his way to the mountain top.

As he climbed higher and higher to the top of the mountain, a dark figure suddenly appeared. He panicked, refocused, and was then certain it was a brown bear. Though it was his first time to encounter one, he was certain based on pictures he had seen and stories he had heard from his parents.

His legs quivered and he felt unable to move. Just as the bear was about to pounce on terrified Tshe bzang, Sbu ra leapt on the bear. Suddenly recalling his father's lessons on what to do when encountering a brown bear, Tshe bzang ran down the mountain. Though he heard Sbu ra wailing in pain, he was too frightened to do anything but continue descending the mountain.

When he reached the area where his parents and the other villagers were, he burst into tears and threw himself into his mother's arms. In a shaky voice, he managed to tell what had happened - Sbu ra was fighting a brown bear to save his life.

Tshe bzang's father called several villagers and they then set off to rescue Sbu ra. They soon found Sbu ra. He was dead, sprawled in a pool of blood.

#### NON-ENGLISH TERMS

a thos ཨ་ཐོས།

dbang 'dus sgröl ma དབང་འདུས་སྐྱོལ་མ།

lo sar ལོ་སར།

ma Ni མ་ཉི།

ri bdag རི་བདག།

rtsam pa རྩམ་པ།

spro lo སྤྱོལ་ལོ།

sbu ra སུ་ར།

tshe bzang ཚེ་བཟང་།

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