

The Taoist Pear Tree

In a time so long ago that red tigers sang and white deer danced in China, a rich peasant went to market. Every fall he had luscious pears to sell, and was determined to ask a very high price. Once he had found a good place in the market, he called out, "Pears! Perfect pears!"

A ragged-looking monk approached him and bowed. "May this poor one be given one of your perfect pears?"

The peasant said, "Why should I give a pear to you? You haven't done an honest day's work in your life."

The monk did not walk away, but repeated his request. The peasant became angry. "You are lower than a dog. No money, no pears."

"Good sir, I cannot count the number of pears in your wheelbarrow. I have only asked for one. Why has this made you so angry?"

By then, a crowd had assembled around the peasant and the monk. "Give him a little pear," someone suggested. "Have mercy. It is only one pear."

But the peasant wouldn't hear of it. "No means no. No money, no pear."

Finally an elderly man bought a pear and with both hands handed it reverently to the old monk. The monk bowed and thanked him, then said, "When I became a monk, I gave up everything. I have no home, no clothes, no food other than what is given to me. But I do have a marvelous tree that gives perfect pears. I shall not be selfish. I shall invite each one of you to eat one of my pears. It will be an honor to share my bounty with you all."

The people were surprised. "If you have pears, why were you begging for a pear?"

"Ah, I had to have a seed first. One must start with a seed." The monk ate his pear with great pleasure. When there was just one small seed left, he quickly dug a hole in the ground, planted the seed and gently covered it with earth. Then he

asked for water. One woman in the crowd handed him a small jug of water. The monk poured it on the soil. In moments, green leaves sprouted up through the earth. A crowd grew to watch. The leaves grew quickly, and soon, in front of their eyes stood a small pear tree with branches, and then more branches and leaves and more leaves.

A gasp filled the marketplace as the tree burst into a cloud of fragrant white flowers and the flowers turned into large, sweet-smelling pears. The monk's face was glowing with pleasure. "Who would like to help an old man pick his perfect pears?" A small boy came forward and climbed the branches quickly. He handed each pear down to the monk, who handed them to people in the crowd until each one had been refreshed by a delicious pear. The old monk smiled. Then he took his axe and before people even realized what was happening, the tree was cut down. The monk picked it up, put it over his shoulder, and went on his way.

The rich peasant had watched the scene in amazement. He had not been able to believe his eyes. He looked back at his barrow. It was empty! Not a single pear was left. One of the handles of the barrow was missing, too. Then the peasant knew what had happened. He ran across the market place, shouting, but the monk was nowhere to be seen. The pear tree was leaning against a building, looking very like a barrow handle. The peasant raged all the way back to his empty barrow, where the people licked the pear juice from their chins, laughing.