

Today I'd like to tell a story called The Brave Little Parrot. This version is an adaptation of one of the stories in a collection known as the Jataka Tales (found in the book *Before Buddha Was Buddha: Learning From the Jataka Tales* by Rafe Martin). Jataka is a Sanskrit word that means "birth stories," and the Jataka Tales are stories that the Buddha told about his past lives, before he became fully enlightened. In other words, they are stories about his journey to awakening. They portray him in the muck and mess of life doing his best to do what's right but not always knowing what that means and sometimes making the wrong choice. In many of the tales he is in the form of an animal.

In the story I'm going to tell, the Buddha was once a little gray parrot who lived contentedly in a forest with all the other animals. I know of two versions, each with very different endings. I'll tell both endings.

*"When lightning set a tree ablaze and the parrot's forest begins to burn, the parrot cries out a warning to others: 'Fire! Run to the river!'" Then she flies toward the safety of the river and its other shore.*

*"But as she flies, she sees below her animals and trees already trapped, surrounded by flames. And suddenly she sees a way to save them. She flies to the river. The animals already huddled safely there are sure nothing more can be done. Each offers a valid reason for staying safely put where they are and not making further efforts. But the little parrot says she has spotted a way, so she must try.*

*"She wets her feathers in the river, fills a leaf cup with water, and flies back over the burning forest. Back and forth she flies carrying drops of water. Her feathers become charred, her claws crack, her eyes burn red as coals.*

*"A god looking down sees her. Other gods laugh at her foolishness, but this god changes into a great eagle, flies down, and tells her it's hopeless, to turn back. She won't listen but continues bringing drops of water. Seeing her selfless bravery, the god is overwhelmed and begins to weep. His tears put out the fire and heal all the animals, plants and trees. Falling on the little parrot, the tears cause her charred feathers to grow back red as fire, blue as a river, green as a forest, yellow as sunlight. She is now a beautiful bird and flies happily over the healed forest."*

That's the happy ending.

In the other ending, the little gray parrot stays true to her mission of delivering drops of water over the raging fire until she succumbs to exhaustion, never knowing if her efforts made a difference but content that she did what she could to help.

In this story, the little parrot finds herself at a crossroads. She would be able to save herself, but recognizes that this is not enough. She has the gift of flight, after all, a gift that other animals huddled at the river do not have. As a consequence of this gift, as she flies above the forest she has a wide view and can see the full reality that earth-bound animals cannot see. She sees the big picture. In one ending everything turns out happily. The tears of the god put the fire out and also heal the parrot of her wounds, bringing her feathers alive with color. In the other ending, her mission costs the little gray parrot her life. She dies not knowing if her efforts made any difference but content that she did what she knew she had to do.

I tell this story because, whichever ending you prefer, I think it is a rich metaphor for Metta practice. What possible difference can the cool drops of metta make on the raging fires of our lives, our forest, our home? Evidence might suggest that it makes no difference, for no sooner does one flame die out than another roars to life. Perhaps you, like the little parrot, have heard voices inside your head telling you how foolish it is to continue, and yet, here you are today.

For me, the heart of the story is that the little parrot has the audacity to ignore a god—a god!—who pronounced her mission hopeless and to stop. Luckily for the forest and the other animals, she ignored the god. Indeed, it was audacity that saved the day, for insisting on following the dictates of her own heart knocked the god off this throne; changed him, moved him to tears, opened him up—his tears made the difference.

We should not overlook this lesson in the tale of the little parrot. Sometimes we give the voices in our heads the status of a god and allow them to override what we know to be true in our hearts. The little parrot did not set out with the goal of making the gods cry so that their tears would quell the blaze. She simply avoided hesitating to use her gift of flight for the benefit of all. She just did what she had to do, not knowing if or how it would make any difference at all. She simply showed up wholeheartedly as a small being in a big world on fire. And in the end, it was enough.

Please spend a few moments reflecting on how this tale speaks to you right now, this morning, in the midst of the fires of life. Please allow an intention of good will to arise and direct it wholeheartedly to yourself.

May I take flight on the wings of good will.

May I use my gifts for the benefit of all beings.

May I find trust in the midst of doubt.

May I do what I can to ease the fires of life.