

A Path Leads Through the Forest

By James Lewis

A new student, young but very keen, came to the monastery. One day, the abbot sent the student to the village to buy a few items for the kitchen. The student set off toward his destination, through a forest that lay between the monastery and the village.

As he walked, he glanced at the trees along the path, moss growing on their trunks. Bushes grew thick along the edge of the path, and then he noticed, as he looked down at the path itself, the different stones that had been exposed as dirt was worn away by all the people who had walked on the path. He thought that if he paid attention only to the path and cleared his mind of thoughts, he may be able to meditate as the monks did back at the monastery.

After concentrating on the path for a while he found himself becoming very clear-minded, as if he were learning to meditate, something he found very hard to do. This thrilled him. But a little later he realized that he had not yet arrived at his destination. The path must be longer than I thought, he thought. No matter, I'll soon be there. He continued to focus his attention on the path.

After a while, light began to fade from the sky. Then it became dark, and he could walk no further. He rubbed his shaved head feeling how cool the skin had become. He pulled his woollen robes tightly to his body. He spied a spot under a large tree where the pine needles were dry, and he stepped off the path and curled up under the tree and fell asleep.

When he woke the next day, he began to walk again. Now he realized he was lost. He felt panic rising in him, but he remembered how clear-minded he had been the day before, so he focused all his attention on the path. I'm on a path after all, he thought, it must lead somewhere, to the village, or at least back to the monastery. Then it began to rain, not too heavily, just enough to dampen his woollen robes, and steam rose from his robes as he walked.

He walked and walked and then it became twilight. It's becoming night again, he thought, very worried. But he saw under a very old stump a hole. When he peered inside the hole, he saw the sand under the old roots was clean, so he climbed inside, curled up, and fell asleep.

When he woke the next day, he didn't know what to think. He shook a little sand from his robes and thought for a moment how they had protected him. Then he began walking again, but as he walked, he forgot about the village and the monastery, and thought about how he needed water to drink and food to eat, and wondered where he would get these things. He looked for a stream in the forest as he walked.

Then he was very surprised to see a group of monks standing on the path. He stopped and they rushed toward him and threw their arms around him and said, "We were worried, brother." "We came to find you." "You were lost in the forest but now you're safe." Then as they walked back to the monastery one of the monks turned to him and asked, "You came from such a dark part of the forest. What did you see there?"

The monk said nothing.

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