

Guru Gobind Singh and the donkey

A Sikh story

Key Ideas: respect for animals, appearances can be deceptive.

One day, Guru Gobind Singh was walking through the city of Anandpur. Suddenly, the air was shattered by the long, exhausted braying of the donkey that belonged to the vegetable stall-holder in the market. Burdened down by its heavy load, thirsting for water in the mid-day heat, the donkey was wailing its hardship. But the locals were used to it. They heard it everyday. They mocked and laughed at the stupid donkey.

But the Guru felt pity for the animal. 'If that were the roar of a tiger, they would not laugh' he thought. The thought put an idea in his head. At home he had the gift of a tiger skin, given him months ago. He had some friends bring the donkey to him. He led the animal home, fed and watered it, then gently laid the tiger's skin along its back. Back to the village he led it and let it roam free.

The donkey was amazed. Everywhere he went, now, a path was cleared for him. Women and children, rushed from him screaming; the men cowered in corners. Even the other animals kept their distance, jumping out of the way in fear. Soon, the donkey was alone in the market. Even his master ran when he saw him, but he left those lovely piles of apples and carrots. Soon the donkey was having the feast of a lifetime. It was hard to understand because until today, he was beaten if he so much as sniffed at the fruit and vegetables.

But the city was terrified. They had to be rid of the dangerous tiger wandering round the market. No one was safe. They must drive it back to the forest. The problem was to find a way and a meeting was called to solve the problem. At the meeting, the Guru had an idea. He would frighten the tiger and they could drive it before them, back into the forest. So it was agreed.

Soon the drum beats echoed round the market place bewildering the poor donkey. This way and that it turned, then beat a retreat as far into the forest as it could, anywhere away from the noise. His whole body shivered in a panic. He gave voice to his fear in a loud, quivering bray. The hunters stopped. They could not believe their ears. 'But that is no tiger.' they shouted to one another. 'Surely, that is only the vegetable donkey from the market.' Slowly they approached. In a clearing, the donkey stood staring at them nervously, the skin of a tiger hanging caught on the branch of a shrub.

Slowly, the Guru soothed the frightened animal, smoothing its head and ears with his hand. 'Remember, the vegetable donkey' he told the people. 'He wore the skin of a tiger, but he had only the spirit and actions of a donkey.'