

R. Keller KIMBROUGH

TRANSLATION

The Tale of the Handcart Priest

R. Keller KIMBROUGH is an associate professor of Japanese Literature at the University of Colorado Boulder.

**A**T A TIME in the not-so-distant past, there was once a venerable Zen priest. Following in the steps of the reverend Bodhidharma, patriarch of the west,<sup>1</sup> he passed more than thirty years in diligent study, straining his eyes by the light of fireflies and the snow. He eventually awoke to the nature of the individual's and the Buddha's body, the non-transmitted teachings of the buddhas and the patriarchs, the extra-scriptural instructions, and those truths that are not expressed in words. He began to feel a little pride because there was now nothing, he thought, that weighed on his mind.

The priest pondered: "To take monastic vows means 'to leave the home.' So if the three worlds are our home from the start,<sup>2</sup> then it won't do for me to live in any one place, or to bother with what other people think." Having thus made up his mind, he built himself a small cart upon which to ride. He would wander where his two wheels took him, and when night fell he would sleep where he parked. Because he lived in his cart, people called him the Handcart Priest.

Once when there had been a lovely snowfall, the Handcart Priest rolled his cart to the Saga Plain. As he was gazing upon the surrounding scene, Tarōbō of Mt. Atago saw him there and thought, "This person looks a little happy with himself! I might as well fool with him a bit." Manifesting as a fellow priest, Tarōbō descended Mt. Atago and approached the edge of the plain. "Hello there, you Handcart Priest!" he shouted. "I'd like to have a word."

"Who are you?" the priest replied. Without the slightest explanation, Tarōbō intoned:

<i>ukiyo wo ba</i>	Why do you roll
<i>nani to ka meguru</i>	around this world of sorrow,
<i>kuruma-zō</i>	you Handcart Priest?
<i>mada wa no uchi ni</i>	You look to be caught up still
<i>ari to koso mire</i>	in the cycle of wheels. <sup>3</sup>

\* This translation is from the annotated text in *Kuruma-zō sōshi*, vol. 2 (Kyoto: Kyōto Teikoku Daigaku, 1941), 15–34, and the unannotated text in Yokoyama Shigeru and Matsumoto Ryūshin, eds., *Muromachi jidai monogatari taisei*, vol. 4 (Tokyo: Kadokawa Shoten, 1976), 273–81.

1. Bodhidharma is traditionally recognized as the founder of the Zen school of Buddhism. "West" in this case means west of China, hence India and Central Asia.

2. The Three Worlds are the worlds of desire, form, and non-form; they constitute the three realms of delusion through which sentient beings transmigrate according to their karma.

3. Tarōbō equates the Handcart Priest's rolling progress with the plight of sentient beings who revolve in the endless cycle of birth and death.

“A delightful turn of phrase!” the Handcart Priest replied, and he said:

<i>ukiyo wo ba</i>	I do not revolve
<i>meguranu mono wo</i>	in this world of sorrow!
<i>kuruma-zō</i>	The Handcart Priest
<i>nori mo urubeki</i>	could ride in a cart (receive the Law) only
<i>waga araba koso</i>	if there were a self (if there were wheels).

Tarōbō took in the priest’s response. “He’s a wily one,” he thought. Drawing closer, he spoke: “How about it, Handcart Priest? To which school’s teachings do you subscribe?”

The Handcart Priest stared. “What a lot of nerve!” he thought. “He must have come to disturb me because he thinks I’m full of pride.” The Handcart Priest replied: “Well, sir, since the tenets of my school are transmitted outside the written scriptures and not set down in words, they cannot be spoken or explained. We reject the various sects because they point to written words to teach. Just consider the course of the breeze that flutters a single leaf—now that is intriguing!”

“Then what is the message of the Buddha?” Tarōbō inquired.

“To abstain from all evil deeds, and to perform every goodness.”

“Then why are there dharma companions in hell?”<sup>4</sup>

“Because if people like me didn’t venture into hell,” the Handcart Priest said, “then how would wicked people like you who are sunken down in the evil realms ever obtain release?”

“Well, as the Founder said, ‘it is easy to enter the world of the buddhas, but difficult to enter that of evil.’ So enter an evil realm for a while—come over to where I live!”

“Where you live? You’re that Tarōbō who lives on the peak of Mt. Atago!”

“And where’s your home?”

“No one place.”

“Then what’s that cart of yours?”

“The carriage of the burning house.”<sup>5</sup>

Tarōbō was defeated. “I need to take this up with the twelve *tengu*,” he thought to himself, and he replied: “It’s as you say, Handcart Priest. I live on Mt. Atago. There’s no carriage road, but do come. I’ll be waiting.” A single black cloud streaked across the sky and tumbled to the ground. Tarōbō stepped upon it and vanished without a trace.

“I was ready to leave,” the Handcart Priest thought, “but maybe I’ll stay. The way that fellow was talking, it sounds like he may come back. If he does, then I’ll

4. A dharma companion is a being that leads others to the path of the Buddha. Tarōbō suggests that dharma companions go to hell in spite of their good deeds.

5. The Single Vehicle of the Dharma, as described in the *Lotus Sutra* parable of the burning house.

catch him and make him do some magic, come what may.” Clearing his mind, the Handcart Priest gazed out upon the surrounding scene.

Now around this time the tree-leaf *tengu* who live here and there heard news of Tarōbō’s encounter with the Handcart Priest, and they gathered together to consult. “Listen, everybody,” one of them said, “it seems that our Tarōbō ran into some scoundrel known as the Handcart Priest at the Saga Plain. The priest was clever or something, and Master Tarōbō flew back to Atago to discuss it with the twelve *tengu*. That’s what I heard. So why don’t we go to Saga and try to shake him up a little?” The tree-leaf *tengu* all thought that this was a fine idea, and flocking together like clouds or mist, they made their way before the Handcart Priest.

Seeing the tree-leaf *tengu*, the priest thought, “Whatever they are, they’ve surely come to meddle with me.” He carefully cleared his mind. The tree-leaf *tengu* spoke as one: “Hello, you Handcart Priest! You’ve gotten so proud of yourself, why don’t you step into our world for a while?” They flew this way and that before his very eyes, demonstrating all their supernatural skills, but the Handcart Priest meditated upon the surrounding scene and was not perturbed in the least.

The *tengu* drew closer, wondering what to do. They took hold of his carriage shafts and began to climb on board. “Little pests,” the priest growled, and swinging his *hossu* flapper,<sup>6</sup> he struck one hard on the wings. The *tengu* tumbled to the ground. “You hateful Handcart Priest!” the remaining *tengu* cried, and they fell upon him in a swarm. The priest chanted an invocation to Fudō,<sup>7</sup> sweeping clear a space all around. Frightened by the priest’s power, the tree-leaf *tengu* scattered and disappeared.

Tarōbō returned to Mt. Atago to gather the twelve and eight *tengu*. Each of them appeared at his home in an instant. Tarōbō was overjoyed, and he came out to greet them. “I’ve invited you all here to discuss a certain scoundrel known as the Handcart Priest,” he said. “He’s got himself full of pride at Saga, where he’s meditating on the views.” Tarōbō explained everything from beginning to end. The other *tengu* were incensed. “That Handcart Priest!” one of them exclaimed. “However strong his Buddhist powers are, we should be able to obstruct him if we choose. Let’s go get him!”

The *tengu* were all eager to set out, when Jirōbō from Mt. Hira spoke: “It’s certainly strange that Sōjōbō from Mt. Kurama isn’t here. His peak is right nearby.” “Indeed,” everyone agreed, “Sōjōbō is a match for a thousand. Why didn’t he come? Let’s send a messenger, quick!” A tree-leaf *tengu* was instructed to ask Sōjōbō to appear at once. Having received his charge, the messenger departed for Mt. Kurama, where he met with Sōjōbō and delivered his appeal.

6. A *hossu* is a Buddhist ritual implement resembling a wooden-handled hemp or horsehair duster.

7. Fudō Myōō, leader of the Five and Eight Great Mantra Kings.

Sōjōbō spoke: “Yes, well, I recently met that scoundrel, the Handcart Priest, at the Ichihara Plain. He shattered my wings, and I may not survive. So you’ll have to excuse me this time.”

“But Master Sōjōbō,” the messenger said, repeating his request, “we’ll never succeed without you. Please come!”

Sōjōbō was enraged. “How dare you speak such nonsense! Can’t you see that I’m hovering between life and death? And yet you still request my presence? It’s incredible! Hurry back and give them my reply.”

The messenger quickly returned and related his conversation. “What?” the various *tengu* exclaimed. “If the Handcart Priest can do that to the likes of our Sōjōbō, then he’s no ordinary man. You should give up your plan this time, Tarōbō, and wait for a proper opportunity.” The *tengu* all wagged their tongues in dread, suddenly disenchanted with their task.

Sagamibō of Mt. Shiramine stepped forward and spoke: “What happened to Sōjōbō happened because he was alone. And it was probably his own fault. With this many of us, it should be easy to corrupt that priest!” “Yes, yes, that’s true, too!” the many *tengu* cried, and they all clamored to take up the fight.

The sun slowly dipped behind the western mountains. The Handcart Priest watched as cawing crows sought out their nests, and he thought to himself, “There’s no use in spending a snowy night like this in such a forlorn field. I suppose I’ll make my way toward some village.” He was redirecting his carriage shafts when he heard a voice from the sky:

“Hello, Handcart Priest! Where are you going? As they say, ‘there’s no path through the snow,’ so you’ve got no way to return! You’re so conceited, imagining that there’s no one as lofty as you, but do you think your pride won’t leave a trace? Will that non-attachment-desire-for-the-Dharma business push or pull your cart? Turn your heart toward evil! Good and bad are like the two wheels of your cart: if there’s the Buddhist law, there’s the worldly law; if there’s delusion, there’s enlightenment; if there are buddhas, there are non-buddhas; and if there’s the Handcart Priest, then there’s Tarōbō the ascetic. Conjure if you will, and I will too. You can use your magic powers, but mine are just as strong! How about it, priest—shall we test our skills for fun?”

Startled by the voice, the Handcart Priest gazed up toward Mt. Atago. He saw a black cloud trailing in the sky. It contained Tarōbō and a multitude of other *tengu*, too numerous to count. The priest had been expecting them, however, and he was not disturbed in the least. “You can’t move my heart,” he said, “no matter how you try. So just go home.”

The *tengu* replied: “Say what you like, but we can take you if we want!” They all jumped down on the snow and began to lash the priest’s cart with switches. The priest watched and then exclaimed: “What an amazing bunch of creatures!

Do you think the cart will move if you thrash it? Why don't you whip the ox instead?"

"True" the *tengu* said, "the cart has no mind." They wished to strike the ox, but there was none to strike. "Just beat the cart," they cried, the same as before. They flogged it mercilessly, but the cart refused to budge. The priest watched. "Stupid fools on the path of man and ox!" he said. "Why don't you strike the ox that you can see? Or are you blind to the man-ox before your eyes? Get away from there!"

The *tengu* were enraged. "So if we beat you," they said, "then the cart will move?" "Of course!" the priest replied. "Now I'll show you how I strike the white ox of the open space.<sup>8</sup> Watch this!" The Handcart Priest raised his *hossu* flapper and struck the air. Strange to say, the cart, which until now had seemed to be a rickety contraption, wobbled forward with neither an ox nor a man to pull and instantly flew up into the sky. It circled around the mountains and rivers of Saga, Ogura, Ōi, and Arashi before returning. The *tengu* were stunned as they took in the sight.

"So, how about your miracle?" the Handcart Priest inquired. The many *tengu* jostled and clamored that they, too, would show him a marvel, whereupon they split apart the earth in a rush of flames, revealing the realms of hell and eternal carnage. Before their very eyes they saw a Lord something-or-other face off against a Lord this-or-that and declare their names, ready to fight. The lords grappled and fell heavily between their horses, where one took the other's head and the other had his taken.

There were still others in retreat, sorely wounded, and others setting fires and battling as if this were their last. To the side there was a warrior declaring his name. He shouted, "Watch and learn how a fearless fighter ends his life! Take this as your model!" He slashed open his belly and pulled out his entrails. Other warriors could be seen locked in mortal combat, until flames again erupted from the earth and the snowy plain became as it was before.

"This is amazing, fascinating!" the Handcart Priest thought to himself, his mind slightly shaken. The *tengu* realized that they were succeeding. "Listen, priest," they said, "we can show you sights like these for a hundred days and a hundred nights, if we choose."

The Handcart Priest quickly regained his composure. "Once will be enough," he said. "From now on, I'll use my Buddhist powers to keep you from performing such feats."

"But they're easy to do!" the *tengu* shot back. "Shall we show you a vision of the Paradise World this time?<sup>9</sup> Here, take a look!"

The Handcart Priest pressed his palms together, bowed once to the open air,

8. The Handcart Priest again refers to the *Lotus Sutra* parable of the burning house.

9. The Pure Land Paradise of Amida Buddha.

and recited a demon-quelling spell. Miraculously, purple clouds spread from the mountains all around, though the sky until then had been clear. First the Mantra King Fudō, then Kongara, Seitaka, the Twelve Guardian Deities, and a host of other demon-quelling gods and buddhas appeared from within the clouds. They compelled the free-flying *tengu* to kneel before the Handcart Priest and swear that they would never again perform their evil deeds. With shamefully drooping wings, the great and small *tengu* took an oath, saying, “You awesome Handcart Priest, we humbly promise to never again play our wicked tricks on you.”

“If that’s so,” the Handcart Priest said, “then I’ll forgive you. Now get out of here!” The many *tengu* withdrew. Escaping into the clouds and mist, they all flew off toward Mt. Atago.

It was because the Handcart Priest was so deeply versed in the Way of the Dharma that he evinced such miracles from time to time. His feats were made possible by the conquering power of the Buddhist Law. Have faith, have faith! The Buddhist Kings will defend the Buddhist Law.