

On the Road with Monkey King

DIANE WOLKSTEIN

Journey to the West recounts the numerous adventures of Xuanzang, the determined, good-hearted priest, and his alter ego Sun Wukong, the trickster Monkey King, as they travel to India to bring Buddhist scriptures back to China.

I set out to comprehend this 2,200 page novel by telling parts of it in Chinatown to Chinese immigrants to increase their knowledge of English. Six months later in March 2008, I produced a three-day marathon with 26 storytellers telling the entire epic. I then selected 20 of the 100 episodes and told them in every venue imaginable: in libraries in the Bronx to Afro-American teenagers, in universities in Taiwan to Buddhist nuns and students, in theatres and museums in New York, Canada, and Australia; alone and with musicians. A bit like a chameleon, the story stretched to become raucous, philosophical, adventurous, and spiritual, depending on the venue.

By the end of two years, by adding one episode to another and discussing the episodes with the audiences, I began to grasp the character of Monkey King and could tell a 45-minute version, spanning Monkey King's birth to his imprisonment in the mountain.

In 2010, my trip to Taiwan to study Mandarin and work with *qigong* masters, brought unexpected insights. In their temples and in their homes, I experienced the great love the Chinese people have for Gwan Yin, the guiding Spirit who "supervises" the journey. Meeting with Zen Master Cheng Yeng, the founder of Tzu Chi Foundation, which is dedicated to the relief of suffering worldwide, actualized my understanding of both Gwan Yin and Xuanzang's dedication to others.

The joy of working on a big story is the wisdom we discover both outside and within. We set out with the story's protagonists in one place and then travel to a deeper interior territory. We experience and understand new and different emotions and feelings. It takes a long time, because transformation is slow and repetitive. ("Fall down seven, get up eight.") Inviting others to share this opportunity with us enriches the process and links us to the wisdom of those who have already made the journey. I am still en route. ☺

Recommended Reading:

Desire, Meeting with Zen Master Cheng Yen, Parabola: Vol. 35.



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speaks from the heart of each story she tells, including a number of epics. Throughout 40 years of storytelling, she has been known for meticulous research and a wide range of stories. A teacher of storytelling and mythology, she is the author of 23 books.