Year after year, Magnificent Monkey King and his monkey clan enjoyed carefree lives in the Cave of the Water Curtain. They spent their days in perfect happiness, swinging, swaying, dangling, hanging, lurching, reeling from vines and trees, eating fruits, and playing all sorts of monkey games. It now seemed that they would be happy, content, cheerful, blissful, joyful forever in their new home.

But one day, something changed, deviated. It was during a birthday party for the king. All the monkeys had brought him beautiful, pretty, attractive, lovely flowers and delicious, tasty, savory, luscious fruits—especially peaches, his favorite. Sitting on his jeweled, ornate throne, surrounded by his beloved monkeys, Monkey should have had the happiest day of his life. Instead, in the middle of the celebration, he burst into tears.

The monkeys were shocked, startled, horrified, appalled, frightened. They had never seen their king sad, unhappy, depressed, downcast, discouraged, gloomy, somber, glum, miserable, forlorn, blue, sorrowful before. And now he was crying!

It was the curious, inquisitive monkey who stood up and said, “What is wrong?”

Monkey wiped away his tears. “Dear monkeys, we are happy today, but with each birthday we grow older and older. I just realized, conceived, comprehended that one day we shall all die, and our joy, happiness, bliss shall end.” He cried even harder.

The monkeys thought about what he had said. They bung, drooped their heads and started to cry, too.

Grandmother Monkey stood up. “Magnificent King,” she said, “if that is what is making you sad, unhappy, depressed, downcast, discouraged, gloomy, somber, glum, miserable, forlorn, blue, sorrowful, I have an idea. I learned from my grandmother, who learned from her grandmother, that there are three types of beings who never die. Why don’t you go and learn their secrets?”

Monkey jumped up on his throne. “Who are these three types of beings?”

“First are the sages. They are the wise teachers. They study the secret of life and learn to stay young forever. Second are the immortals, like Jade Emperor, who know the secret of life and so can live forever. Finally there are the Buddhas, such as the great Buddha and Goddess Guanyin. Since they have achieved complete enlightenment, they live the secret of life.”
Monkey was so excited that he did a somersault in the air. “What a brilliant idea, Grandmother,” he said. “I will seek out a sage and learn the secret of living forever. Then I’ll come back and teach, instruct, show it to all of you so we can enjoy our lives together forever.”

Monkey was so enthusiastic that he said his goodbyes immediately, instantly, promptly, quickly, directly. Before an hour had passed, he started off in search of a sage who could teach him the secret of eternal life.

Monkey traveled hundreds of leagues to countless far-off lands. He met with people of all sorts. He even learned to dress and speak like them, but in all of his travels he discovered, learned, noticed, observed, saw that most people were more interested in money and fame than in the secret, mystery of life. Even after nine years of searching, not a single worthy sage did he find. He was beginning to think he would never find one.

Then, one day, he was walking in a deep, dark forest far from the Mountain of Flowers and Fruits. Here the leaves were so thick, dense, numerous, crowded that no sunlight came through. A peaceful silence filled the air.

In the middle of this forest he heard a man singing:

I chase no glory, I pursue no coin.
Fame and wealth are passing clouds to me.
A simple life prolongs my days.
And those I meet upon my way
Are sages one and all,
Are sages one and all.

“At last!” cried Monkey. “I have found a sage!” He ran toward the sound of the voice.

A man was cutting branches from the trees.
“Reverend sage,” Monkey cried, bowing deeply. “Consider me your student.”

At these words the woodcutter looked up, astonished, surprised, astounded, amazed, and dropped his axe. “But I am not a sage, sir,” he said. “I’m just a humble woodcutter. You mustn’t bow to me. “If you are not a sage, why did you sing that song?” demanded Monkey.
The woodcutter looked alarmed. “I – I didn’t intend to mislead anyone,” he stammered, stuttered, faltered. “That song was taught to me by a great sage who lives over the hills from here.”

“What is his name?”

“Master Subhodi.”
Monkey grinned, smiled, beamed. “Well, well. Then you must show me where this sage lives.”
The woodcutter, who was a little frightened of Monkey, led the way along a path in the woods. It
grew darker and darker. When it grew too dark to see, the woodcutter stopped. “I can go no farther,” he said. “Follow this path over nine hills and nine streams, and you will come to Master Subhodi’s cave.”

The forest was pitch-black, but Monkey was untroubled, calm, unconcerned. His bright eyes lit the way for him. Monkey followed the path up the hills and across the streams, just as the woodcutter told him. After a day of walking, hiking, the forest grew a little less dark, and by the second day it was lighter still. At last Monkey came to a cave with huge stone doors. He tried them, but they were locked, sealed, latched.

As Monkey King stood there, a prickling, sharp, stinging, tingly sensation came over him. He felt that something strange, unusual, peculiar, odd, unfamiliar, curious was about to happen. Nervously, he jumped into a tree. The whole world grew still. The only sound Monkey heard was the beating of his own heart.

Then he heard a noise, sound. Crreeeaak! Slowly, very slowly, the great stone doors began to swing open.