

The Tale of the Itako Swamps



Since long ago, there have been Itakos on Mt. Osore. These Itakos are blind women who are able to speak the language of the dead.

Once upon a time, the Itakos were under a severe instructor. The instructor kicked out a young woman and an old woman, claiming they were unfit to be Itakos.

The two Itakos wandered down Mt. Osore. Here and there they rested under the roofs of people's houses. They were surprised by a dog's barking at one house and quickly ran away. Unsure of where to go next, they began a long journey away from the mountain.

The two Itakos believed that Buddha had blessed them when they arrived in the town of Noheji and found a swamp. They could hear fish jumping and knew where they were. The two Itakos, using a towel, quickly caught an eel. They thanked Buddha for his help. After eating, they were full of energy and went about catching more eels to sell. Going down to the village market, the two Itakos were able to trade all of their eels for rice and vegetables. They asked a villager to make a raft and a basket for them to catch more eels.

The old Itako would row to the center of the swamp, and the young Itako would use the basket to scoop up eels. The two Itakos were so pleased that they caught eels and brought them down to the market to sell every day.

One day, the sky darkened with heavy clouds and a strong wind blew down to the swamp. The sudden change gave the old Itako a bad feeling. She said to the young Itako, “Today, let’s take a break.”

The young Itako laughed, “Why should we?” she said, “The eels can’t wait to be caught by us!” and convinced the old Itako to join her on the raft. The young Itako happily rowed the raft to the deep, dark center of the swamp. Suddenly, the



swamp began to bubble and froth. The water swirled and twirled round and round the center. The Itakos had no idea why their raft was swirling and twirling. The two women held on to the raft for their dear lives. “Oh my God! Oh my God!” they screamed in terror.

The wind became wild with anger. Two long whiskers suddenly came out from the water and whipped around to and fro, throwing the Itakos from their raft into the air. A great figure began to rise up and quickly two large round eyes joined the two whiskers. Soon a large mouth emerged from the water, gobbling up the young Itako.

The mysterious, gigantic fish was the Master of the Swamp. It was at least four meters long and took the shape of a catfish. He was very unhappy with the two Itakos. They had forgotten their most important lesson from their days on Mt. *Osore*. The two Itakos only caught the eels and gave no thanks. That aroused the anger of the Master of the Swamp. The Master of the Swamp lifted up its tail and slapped it down, causing the swamp to spread out and become two smaller swamps.

The older Itako, blind to what had happened to the young Itako, had not seen the Master of the Swamp. She only knew that she had lost her friend that day and began once more to pray . She held a memorial service for the young Itako and continued on her journey, away from Noheji.

When the villagers eventually went in search of the two women, they came upon two small swamps where there used to be just one. The villagers knew that something terrible had happened to the Itakos, however no one saw the Master of the Swamp.

The villagers named the two new swamps just Itako Swamps in memory of the Itakos.

