

The Jataka Tales and the Buddhist Conception of Moral Exemplarity

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ABSTRACT

The Jataka Tales are Buddhist moral stories describing the previous lives of the Buddha, illustrating ethical conduct and the law of karma. The Jataka Tales occupy a position of great historical and cultural importance as one of the earliest and most enduring traditions of folklore and fable in India. Through their simple yet profound narratives, they exercised a lasting influence on later didactic works such as the Panchatantra and the Hitopadesha, and, through them, on the wider corpus of world fables. Their themes and episodes were frequently represented in Buddhist art, notably in the sculptures and reliefs of the Ajanta Caves, Bharhut Stupa, and Sanchi Stupa. Above all, the Jataka narratives served as effective instruments of moral instruction employed alike by monks and lay devotees to communicate ethical ideals and social values.

Keywords - Jataka Tales, Buddhist Ethics, Karma and Rebirth, Indian Folklore, Buddhist Art

INTRODUCTION

The Jataka Tales are a celebrated collection of ancient Indian stories that narrate the previous births (janmas) of Gautama Buddha. These stories form an important part of Buddhist literature and are written mainly in Pali, with later versions in Sanskrit and various regional languages. Traditionally, there are 547 Jataka stories, preserved in the Khuddaka Nikaya of the SuttaPitaka.

The ancient writings relating to Buddhism are neither astrological nor strictly philosophical in character. Rather, they consist largely of fables, legends, and moral tales describing the previous lives of the Buddha, commonly known as the Jātaka stories.¹ This literary form follows logically from the Indian doctrine of the transmigration of souls, which teaches that an individual does not perish at death but is reborn repeatedly, either as a human being or as an animal, according to one's deeds (karma).²

This belief led to a distinctive Indian worldview in which the whole of nature was united in a single, indissoluble fellowship. All living beings were regarded as participants in the same great moral journey, differing only in the forms into which they were reborn.³ consequently; Indians developed a special ethical attitude towards animals, for they might be reincarnations of near kinsfolk. Since animals were believed to suffer as humans do, it was considered natural and morally necessary to treat them with compassion and restraint.⁴

These religious and philosophical ideas were not confined to abstract thought but found concrete expression in state policy and social practice. Among historical rulers, Emperor Anoka stands out as a remarkable example. After the Kalinga war, he renounced violence, discouraged hunting, advocated a vegetarian diet, and urged his subjects to show respect for every form of life through his Dhamma edicts.⁵

In the centuries that followed, Indian society continued to emphasize non-violence (ahimsa), and at various periods the death penalty was abolished or sparingly applied.⁶

Throughout the course of Hindu history, both in India and in regions influenced by Indian culture, numerous hospitals and refuges for sick, aged, and injured animals were established, reflecting the deeply rooted concern for animal welfare.⁷ This long tradition of reverence for life ultimately found constitutional recognition in modern India. When the Constitution of the Republic of India was drafted in 1949, a special article was included for the protection and improvement of cattle, particularly the cow, symbolizing the continuity of India's ethical heritage from ancient religious thought to the modern state.⁸

Jataka Tales: Main Stories and Their Moral Values

Jataka Story	Brief Theme	Moral Value / Teaching
Vessantara Jataka	Prince who gives away all his possessions	Supreme generosity and self-sacrifice
Sibi Jataka	King sacrifices his own flesh to save a dove	Compassion and protection of the weak
Monkey King Jataka	Leader saves his troop at the cost of his life	Selfless leadership and duty
Banyan Deer Jataka	Deer offers himself to save a pregnant doe	Mercy, non-violence, and empathy
Hamsa (Golden Goose) Jataka	Wise bird teaches a greedy king	Wisdom over greed
Mahakapi Jataka	Monkey king forms a living bridge	Courage and collective responsibility
Nigrodhamiga Jataka	Deer king reforms a cruel ruler	Moral power over brute force
Kusa Jataka	Deformed but virtuous prince attains success	Inner virtue outweighs outer appearance
Ruru Jataka	Deer saves an ungrateful man	Gratitude and moral integrity
Sasa Jataka	Hare offers himself as food	Altruism and self-denial

(Table Resource: The Jataka or Stories of the Buddha's Former Births, trans. E. B. Cowell et al., Vols. I–VI (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1895–1907).)

The Jataka Tales are distinguished by certain essential features that define both their literary form and ethical purpose. In each narrative, the Bodhisattva appears as the central figure in a former birth, assuming diverse roles—as king, merchant, sage, or even animal—through which exemplary conduct is illustrated. Every tale is designed to impart moral instruction (Dhamma), presenting ideals such as compassion (*karuṇā*), truthfulness (*sacca*), self-sacrifice, wisdom, patience, and non-violence, all firmly grounded in the Buddhist doctrine of karma and rebirth. The simplicity and clarity of their narrative style rendered the Jatakas particularly suited to oral transmission, enabling their wide dissemination and enduring popularity. Consequently, these stories travelled far beyond their Indian origins, spreading throughout Sri Lanka, Southeast Asia, and Central Asia, where they became an influential vehicle for the communication of Buddhist ethical values among monks and lay communities alike.⁹

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