HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Stuart Blackburn, Ph.D.

JATAKA
Buddhaghosa

(c. 5th c. CE)

Readings

The Jataka Tales, translated by E. Cowell**,** 1895-1907
The Jatakas: Birth Stories of the Bodhisatta, translated by S. Shaw, 2006
Readings of the Vessantara Jataka, edited by S. Collins, 2016

History

Although the stories circulated in oral form for centuries, the earliest extant redaction of the complete collection of tales in written form is a text known as both the *Jatakatthavannana* and the *Jatakatthakatha* written probably in the 5th century CE. Containing nearly 550 tales, this text (the tales plus commentary) was part of a massive compilation of Theravada Buddhist scriptures in the Pali language attributed to Buddhaghosa, an Indian scholar of the 5th century CE. It is also noteworthy that linguistic analysis of that early Pali text suggests that it is based on earlier manuscripts, now lost but perhaps dating to the 3rd century BCE. That early date makes sense because it was the time of King Ashoka, who spread Buddhism throughout India and into Ceylon. Also, stone sculptures on Buddhist monuments built in the 2nd and 1st centuries BCE depict scenes from the *Jataka* tales. Smaller numbers of *Jataka* stories are found in many other early Sanskrit texts, such as the *Avadanasataka, the Mahavastu and the Divyavadana,* but the most famous is the *Jatakamala* attributed to Arya Sura (c. 500-600 CE). Other early *Jataka* manuscripts were written in Tibetan (4th c. CE) and Chinese (5th c. CE), and translations of either the Pali or Sanskrit texts were made in all major Indian languages by the late classical period.

Cultural significance

The role of the *Jataka* tales in the history of Buddhism is difficult to overstate. It is important to recall that when it began, sometime in the 6th c. BCE, Buddhism was a repudiation of long-established concepts and practices in the subcontinent. Suddenly, a reformer appeared and challenged ideas of the 'self', of ritual and of gods. The Buddhist doctrines of non-self and impermanence were extremely complex. Even today educated people struggle to comprehend Buddhist views on epistemology and metaphysics, which is why the *Jataka* stories are so crucial. By borrowing plots and figures from existing oral tradition, they are the perfect vehicle for teaching the complicated ideas of a new religion. They teach because they also entertain, which is a combination not always achieved in instruction of any kind. We can gauge the popularity of the stories by their appearance in so many different media at such an early date. Whole stories were virtually carved in stone on Buddhist structures in the 2nd and 1st centuries BCE. Individual scenes were also depicted on stupas in the early centuries of the Christian era in northwest India. They were later painted on cave walls in India (at Ajanta) and China (at Dunhuang). And they became the subject for painters and sculptors in many Asian countries for hundreds of years. Nor have the *Jataka* tales been limited to Buddhist countries. Many of them, especially those of cunning animals, spread from India through Arabic and Persian translations to Europe. Who does not know, for example, the story in which a fox flatters a crow to sing and thus drop its meat for the wily fox to scoop up and eat. That story, The Fox and the Crow, is an international folk-tale found in Aesop but also in a dozen European languages, including Finnish and Lithuanian. It would be no exaggeration to say that these stories (like the *Pancatantra)* have travelled more widely than any other Indian text.

Overview

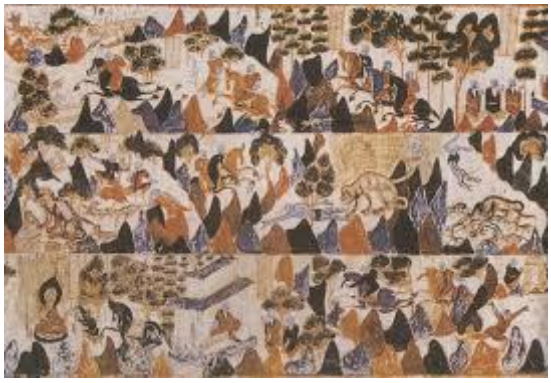
The *Jataka* ('Birth') tales are a collection of fables, that is, didactic stories with animals, that tell the previous lives of the Buddha. Known in Indian literary tradition as *nithi katha* ('moral stories'), the *Jataka* tales are sometimes called 'tales of the Buddha's births,' since each of the nearly 550 stories

narrates one of the previous births of Prince Gautama (also known as Shakya Muni, 'monk of the Shakya clan') that led him on the path of perfection that culminated in his becoming a Buddha. During those previous births he is still a *bodhisattva* ('one who seeks enlightenment') and not fully enlightened. The purpose of the *Jataka* tales, then, is to spread the teachings of Buddhism through the examples dramatised in these fables. Each of the stories has a similar structure. First there is a tale in prose, in which the Buddha-to-be appears as one of the characters, either human or animal. This is followed by a commentary in verse that links the story to an aspect of the Buddha's teaching. These extremely popular stories, which began in oral tradition, are found in all the many sects of Buddhism in all the countries where the religion spread. Some of the tales are brief incidents, while others resemble short stories.

Representative stories

Prince Sattva One of the most popular and beloved of the *Jataka* tales is the story of Prince Sattva. One day he goes hunting with two brothers and they see a tigress who is struggling to feed her cubs. The tigress is gaunt, she has no milk and the little cubs are starving. The brothers debate what to do. One suggests that they return to the palace and bring back some fresh meat to feed the tigress, who could then feed her young. The brothers turn their horses, but then Prince Sattva realizes that it will take too long to ride to the palace and back. He pretends that he is ill and tells his brothers that they should go to the palace alone. When they are out of sight, Prince Sattva takes off his clothes and lies down in front of the weakened tigress, inviting her to eat him. But the animal will not eat someone who is still alive. Then the prince sharpens a length of bamboo, slits his throat and falls off a cliff, landing near the mother tiger. Now the tigress eats the meat and is able to save herself and her children. The brothers return, find the remains of their dead brother and relay the news to their parents, who are overcome with grief. They built a stupa on the spot where Prince Sattva died and hold an annual ceremony to commemorate his great deed of generosity. The commentator then adds that this was a previous life of the Buddha, when he gained virtue and advanced on the path of perfection.

It is easy to understand why this story has become one of the most famous of the *Jataka* tales. The resolve and courage to kill yourself in order to save another is sensational. And the fact that the sacrifice is done on behalf of an animal only underlines the compassion of the act. The story was certainly popular in ancient India. A stupa built in the 2nd century CE near Gujar Khan in present-day Pakistan is said to mark the place where the Bodhisattva gave up his life to save the tigress. In addition, the complete story is depicted in a mural dated to the 6th c. CE and found in the Dunhuang caves in China. Even today, the story is orally told in India, narrated in books, illustrated in comic books and pictured on posters.

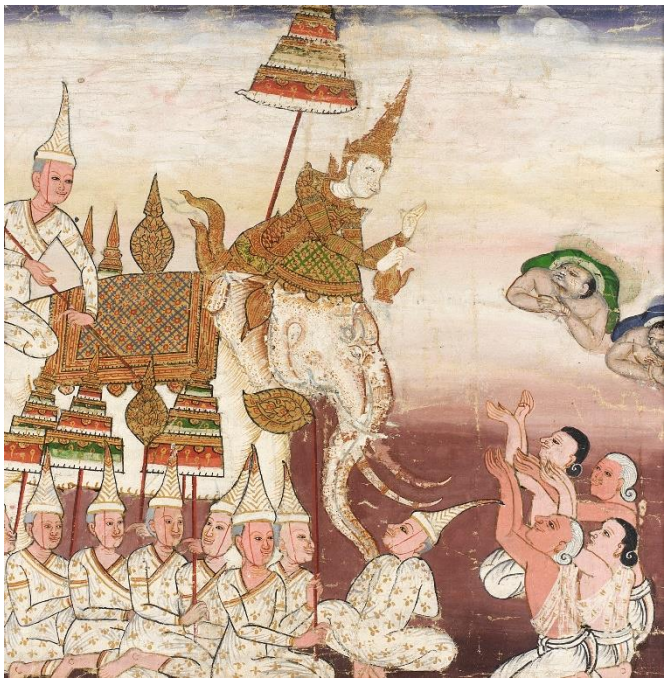


(mural of Prince Sattva and the hungry tigress in a Dunhuang cave, c. 400-1300 CE)

Vessantara Vessantara was the son of the king of Siviratha, whose capital was Jatuttara. His mother was a pious Buddhist who had, in a previous life, gained boons from Indra (king of the gods), one of which was that she would be the mother of the Bodhisattva in his next to last birth. She was so proud that she toured the capital city while pregnant to spread the word of the coming Bodhisattva. One day, when she was in the merchant quarter, the child was born and was therefore named 'Vessan-tara' ('born [among] merchants'). The moment he opened his eyes, he asked his mother to

distribute money to the poor. The boy grew up, married and had two children before succeeding his father on the throne.

The drama begins when Vessantara gives away a magic white elephant that had saved the kingdom from drought by producing rain. Now, without the rain-producing elephant, the people became angry and persuaded the old king to banish Vessantara to the forest and retake the throne. In a scene reminiscent of the *Ramayana* (if not borrowed from it), Vessantara leads his wife and children into the forest. Next, the same generosity that caused problems in the first place brings more distress when Vessantara gives away the horses that are pulling his chariot and then the chariot, too. Barefoot and hungry, the family arrives in a nearby kingdom, whose ruler offers them shelter, but Vessantara refuses any luxury and chooses to live in a cave. Then follows an extraordinary display of the Bodhisattva's generosity: he gives away his own children. What happened was this: A brahmin depended on his young wife to bring him water and care for him, but after she is humiliated by the other women of her village, she refuses to care for the Brahmin. The brahmin then seeks out Vessantara and asks for his children as servants. He agrees, but the children are scared and hide until Vessantara convinces them that their grandfather will protect them. However, Vessantara sees that they are badly mistreated by the Brahmin, who drags them around like bound animals. Hearing the children scream in pain, Vessantara reaches for a sword, but then overcomes his anger and lets the children be taken away. When his wife finds out what has happened, she is initially stricken with grief but then learns to appreciate her husband's act of generosity (in helping an old Brahmin). Knowing that Vessantara would give away his wife, if asked by the Brahmin, the gods go in disguise and ask for her. When Vessantara hands her over, the gods give her back, saying he must safeguard her.



(Vessantara gives away the white elephant, Thailand, late 19th c.)

The gods also rescue his two children by tricking the Brahmin into entering the kingdom of their grandfather, who recognises the children and buys them back. The Brahmin is now rich but falls ill and dies. The grandfather then organises a grand ceremony to celebrate the reunion of the family, and the white elephant is also returned. In the final scene, after the monsoon soaks the land and revives the prosperity of the people, Vessantara is again crowned king.

The story of prince Vessantara is perhaps the most important of all the 550 tales by virtue of the fact that it narrates the Buddha's penultimate human birth. After Vessantara dies, the Bodhisattva is born one last time, this time as Gautama, the prince who goes on to achieve enlightenment and become the fully 'awakened one', or the Buddha. Gautama's life is narrated in the *Buddhacarita* by Asvaghosa dated to approximately 100-200 CE. The Vessantara tale has become a part of Buddhist

life in Sri Lanka and most of Southeast Asia, where it is enacted at the centre of an annual Spring Festival.

The Tiger, the Brahmin and the Jackal This tale, very different from the other two, is less moralistic and more entertainment. It is also, like many Jataka stories, very brief. When a Brahmin happens to see a tiger caught in a trap, the tiger pleads with him to release him. 'Do the right thing, venerable Brahmin,' the animal says. At first the Brahmin refuses, saying that he's not stupid, that once freed, the ungrateful tiger would eat him. But the tiger promises to do no such thing. The tiger is freed, licks his lips and says that, having been cooped up for so long, he's very hungry. The horrified Brahmin buys time by getting the tiger to agree that they will ask the first three things they see to decide what to do next. The first thing is a tree, which says that it has suffered from humans enough and votes for the tiger to eat the Brahmin. A buffalo, the second thing and also mistreated by humans, agrees with the tree. The third thing is a jackal, who pretends not to understand the dilemma. He cunningly asks the tiger to show him how the situation came about in the first place. And once the tiger steps back into the cage, he locks it. The tiger is furious, but the jackal calmly comments that 'it's best to let matters rest as they were.'

Here is a *Jataka* tale that has no obvious moral lesson, unless it is not to trust a trapped tiger or a cunning jackal. Don't be gullible isn't one of the perfections that led the Bodhisattva on the path to enlightenment (even though the Brahmin is said to be one of the previous incarnations of the Buddha). This story (and the dozens of similar stories) show us that the *Jataka* collection is based on pre-existing oral tales that were re-purposed for a Buddhist audience. And an audience has to be entertained. Incidentally, this tale exists in many versions in most Indian languages and also in world literature, including Latin, French and English.

Themes

Generosity If we were to select just one theme from these hundreds of stories it would be the virtue of generosity (as shown in the first two stories summarised above). Generosity (or *dana*, the Pali and Sanskrit word from which we get 'donation') is a key value in Buddhist ethics. Giving and giving away require non-attachment to things, the absence of desire and greed, which are also Buddhist virtues. We have seen in the stories above that a king is praised for giving away an elephant to another king even though the animal has saved his own people from drought. Similarly, we have seen that giving away your own children into virtual slavery is regarded as a good deed if it saves someone else from harm. There are many other such stories—a man gives his eyes to a blind man, and a dove pecks at its flesh to feed its young. Not everyone hearing or reading these stories will agree with such extreme examples of generosity, but that is perhaps their point. The stories push people to the limit of selflessness because the path to enlightenment is hard. These severe stories are also offset by many others in which giving alms to the poor is seen to earn 'merit,' which, in turn, brings favours from the gods (much like Catholicism). Giving is also imbedded in the daily life of Buddhists in Burma and Sri Lanka, where ordinary people are urged to put food in the bowl carried by Buddhist monks. Families are encouraged to 'give' one of their sons to the monastery, and blood donation campaigns take on a religious tone.

Compassion The second great theme of the *Jataka* tales (and Buddhism generally) is compassion (*karuna*). Generosity, of course, presumes come kind of sympathy for others, but compassion is a broader and deeper sentiment that does not necessarily involve any giving. Compassion is regarded as equal to wisdom as a prerequisite to enlightenment, and it finds frequent illustration in the *Jataka* stories, too. In fact, the previous lives of the Buddha are a good vehicle for teaching compassion for all sentient beings (not just humans) because the Buddha is shown to have lived as a wide variety of creatures: a rabbit, a deer, an elephant and so on. In other words, you should have rapport for animals because they could be a potential Buddha in the future. The iconic tale of compassion among and for animals is the story of the monkey king, in which the Bodhisattva is born as a monkey and saves his fellow simians from a band of hunters by stretching his body from one tree to another, forming a bridge across which his thousands of companions reach safety. The monkey king is injured and dies but not before his act of compassion is recognised by the human king and a stupa is built in commemoration. One of the reasons that Buddhism became a world religion, and is still an ethical system that attracts people in the twenty-first century, is its emphasis on compassion. While not everyone possesses that quality in equal measure, most people have an instinct to help others that

only needs to be encouraged.