

Janaka

www.storyandreligion.div.ed.ac.uk/schools/resources

Keywords

Buddhism; Practices and Traditions: renunciation, non-attachment, determination

Notes for teachers

In early Buddhist traditions, and to this day in many Buddhist countries, **renunciation** is considered key to spiritual progress. The Buddha himself was famous for his renunciation, and he founded a monastic community (for monks and nuns) that allowed his most committed followers to pursue religious learning and practice away from the distractions of worldly life. Renunciation is closely linked to the ideal of **non-attachment**. According to Buddhist philosophy, attachment (or desire, or thirst) is what keeps us all bound in the cycle of rebirth and redeath. By overcoming this attachment we are able to attain nirvana or awakening.

This story is part of a closely related network of tales about kings called Janaka who were famous for renouncing. Often they left their kingdoms as the result of seeing a particular sign, such as their own grey hair, or – in this case – a pair of mango trees. Stories of this lineage of kings were known to all three religious traditions of early India – Hindu, Buddhist and Jain. The verse about Mithila being on fire is repeated many times in the literature of all three traditions, which used these stories as a way of exploring the central tension in the early Indian religious landscape, between worldly pursuits/responsibilities and the desire for renunciation.

In addition to renunciation, this story is about the power of **energetic determination**: the hero makes great efforts to win back his father's kingdom (as demonstrated in particular by his response to being shipwrecked) and then makes even greater efforts to renounce what he has won. The contrast between these two goals is clear, but effort and determination are nonetheless praised as crucial to progress on the Buddhist path.

The story of Janaka is, in the Buddhist tradition, a jataka tale, that is to say a story of a past life of the Buddha. (See separate resource sheet for more information about the jataka genre.)

© Naomi Appleton, University of Edinburgh, 2016, CC BY NC.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.

To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>.

You are free to use, share and adapt this work. Not for commercial use.

Questions for Discussion

Comprehension of the story

What does Janaka have to do to win back his father's kingdom?

What does Janaka have to do to give it up?

Why is it important that Janaka wins back his kingdom before giving it up? What would change if the story began with him already king?

Which requires the greatest effort: regaining the kingdom, or leaving it?

What images, metaphors and similes are used to prompt solitary renunciation? How do they work? Do they all work in the same way? What other metaphors or images can you think of?

Application to other contexts

What does this story tell us about family relationships?

Is it right for a husband to leave a wife like this?

What are the benefits of living alone? What are the benefits of living with others?

What does this story tell us about the need for determination in pursuit of our goals?

Reflecting on wider Buddhist issues

What is the role of gods/goddesses in this story? How do they fit into the Buddhist worldview?

Is it important that the hero is identified as the Buddha in a past life? How does that change our understanding of the story?

Is Buddhist renunciation always solitary?

What are the particular benefits of solitary renunciation?

How does renunciation relate to the Buddhist principle of non-attachment?

What do we learn from the story about the Buddhist need for determined effort in order to fulfil Buddhist practices and goals?

Sources / Further Reading

The story here is my own abridged translation of *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā* 539. The full translation is in Naomi Appleton and Sarah Shaw (trans.) *The Ten Great Birth Stories of the Buddha* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Press, 2015) and an older translation can also be found here: <http://sacred-texts.com/bud/j6/j6005.htm>

Janaka

The Buddha told this story to his monks in order to demonstrate that it was not only in his final lifetime that he renounced the world in the pursuit of religious truth.

In the city of Mithila, in the Northeast Indian kingdom of Magadha, long long ago, there was a king who ruled with his younger brother as viceroy. At first the two brothers worked well together, and enjoyed peaceful and prosperous rule. However, rumours started to spread that the king's younger brother was plotting him, and so the king had him sent into exile. Indignant at the false accusations, the younger brother gathered together his supporters and prepared to take the kingdom from his brother by force. As the king prepared to go into battle to defend the kingdom, he told his wife, heavily pregnant, that she should at all costs ensure the safety of their child.

Before long news reached the queen that the king had been killed. She filled a basket with jewels, stretched a rag over them and poured rice on top of that. She dressed herself in dirty rags and left the city via the northern gate, hoping to travel to a place she had heard of called Champa. But she had never been out of the palace alone, and did not know how to get there, so she sat by the road and called out to passers by, asking if any of them knew the way. The king of the gods, Sakka,* seeing her pitiful state, took disguise as a merchant and offered her a ride on his wagon. Although Champa was many miles away, through his magical powers they arrived by nightfall, and the queen entered the city. A kindly man allowed her to live with his family as his sister, and there she gave birth to her son, Janaka. In the course of time, the baby grew into a child, and the child grew into a young man.

Janaka always wondered about his parentage, and was much teased by the other children. Eventually he forced his mother to tell him the truth: "You are the son of a king, whose brother now rules in Mithila city. Your uncle took the city and killed your father, and I fled here." Wishing to avenge his father's death and recapture the city, Janaka decided to go to sea to make money that he could then use to muster an army. His mother begged him not to make such a dangerous journey, and offered him her jewels, but he was adamant. He and five hundred other merchants filled up a vessel with goods and set out to sea. On that very same day the king of Mithila, Janaka's uncle, became ill and took to his bed.

* In Buddhism the gods have extra powers and long lives, but they are not immortal: they will eventually die and be reborn elsewhere. Gods can help humans in times of need, as here, but awakened humans – such as the Buddha – are superior to gods.

In the middle of the ocean a huge storm arose, and this broke the ship apart. As his companions fell into the water and were devoured by sea-monsters, Janaka clung to the mast until the last moment. Then he jumped into the ocean and began swimming towards Mithila. On that same day the king of Mithila, Janaka's uncle, died.

Janaka was miles and miles from the shore, with no land in sight, yet he kept on swimming for seven long days and seven long nights. Eventually the goddess of the ocean spotted him, and – standing in the sky – asked him why he kept swimming even though there was no hope of reaching land. He replied that he should at least try. She was impressed by his persistence, and so she rescued him, plucking him from the water like a bunch of flowers and carrying him to Mithila, where she laid him down on a stone slab in a park.

Meanwhile, in the city there was trouble. This king had no male heir, only a daughter, named Sivali, who was wise and virtuous. He had decreed that the next king would be able to please his daughter, or to solve a number of difficult riddles. The general was the first to pay her a visit, and she, wishing to test him, ordered him around, sending him up and down stairs, and then demanding a foot massage. He, wishing to please her, did all that she asked. Seeing that was not of firm character and was thus unsuitable to be king, she kicked him in the chest and sent him away. Several other suitors were similarly shamed. Nobody, it seemed, could please the princess. Nor could anybody solve the riddles set by the dying king.

Eventually a decision was made to send out the magical state chariot, which, with no driver, would identify a suitable king. The chariot set off swiftly, headed straight to the park in which Janaka lay, and stopped alongside him. Here, they realised, was a man suitable to rule the kingdom, and so they invited him to the palace. Once there, Janaka proceeded to solve all the riddles. He also pleased Princess Sivali, by refusing to obey her demands. He was crowned king, married Sivali, and sent for his mother to come and live with them.

Janaka and Sivali had a son, and for many years they ruled happily. One day, Janaka decided to spend some time in his park. At the entrance to the park were two mango trees, one of which was heavy with ripe fruit, and the other bare of fruit but dark with lustrous green foliage. He picked a mango and ate it, then entered the park for his day's sport. On his way out that evening, he saw that the tree he had eaten from had been stripped of all its fruit, and stood bare, with broken branches. He asked what had happened, and was told that the people had seen the king eat the first fruit, and therefore assumed they were now entitled to eat of it too. The mango tree was truly sorry-looking, especially next to the fruitless but lush and strong and healthy tree that stood beside it. Looking at these two trees, it occurred to Janaka that being king was like being the fruiting tree, while being a renouncer was like

being the fruitless tree: “It is the people with possessions who suffer. I will renounce and become a recluse,” he reflected.

But in deciding to become a renouncer Janaka had not counted on the opposition of his wife Sivali. She, refusing to accept his decision, followed him as he made his way out of the city wearing his ascetic robes and carrying a begging bowl. She had people light big fires around the city and then told him, “Look, King Janaka! Mithila is in flames! You must protect your city and your people!” He replied with a verse that has become famous throughout the world:

“We are so happy, we who have no possessions!
Though Mithila may be on fire, nothing of mine is burning!”

Sivali continued to follow him as he approached a town. Outside the town was a young girl playing in the sand. On one of her wrists she had two bracelets, which jangled noisily as she played. On the other was a single bracelet, which remained silent. Again, Janaka saw the benefits of solitude, and tried to make his wife understand, but she would not. Janaka entered the town, and there he saw a fletcher checking the straightness of his arrows. He would shut one eye and look down the shaft to check for any flaws. Again, Janaka asked his wife to acknowledge the benefits of being alone.

Eventually Janaka picked a piece of grass from the side of the road and showed it to his wife, saying, “Just as it is not possible to re-join this to its clump, so it is not possible for me to re-join you.” At this Sivali fainted on the ground in grief, and, seeing his opportunity, Janaka slipped off into the forest, never to be seen again.

When Sivali came round, she saw that she would never get her husband back. Installing their son on the throne, she herself took up residence in the park as a renouncer, and practised meditation. Both she and her husband attained a heavenly rebirth.

The Buddha explained, “At that time my wife was Sivali, and I was Janaka.”