

Jataka Stories: A Brief Introduction

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<http://www.storyandreligion.div.ed.ac.uk/schools/resources/>

Many (though not all) of the Buddhist stories featured in our collection of resources are “jataka” stories, but what does this mean?

Simply defined, a jataka story relates an episode in a past life of the Buddha.

Usually it is the Buddha who narrates the story of his past life, in order to explain something about a situation or character that he or his followers have encountered.

There is always a character in the story who is identified as the Buddha-to-be. This is often (but not always) the hero.

Many stories illustrate general Buddhist moral ideals, including honesty, wisdom, kindness, generosity and detachment.

In this jataka carved into a stone pillar at the ancient Indian site of Sanchi, the Buddha-to-be is a monkey who saves his troop from the humans by making his body into a bridge to safety, demonstrating his leadership skills, compassion and selflessness. ➔



Because they are understood to have been told by the Buddha, jataka stories show us how Buddhists view the Buddha as having great insight and memory of his past lives. Memory of past lives is viewed as something that is made possible by intense meditation.

As well as being a great visionary, the Buddha is presented as the best possible storyteller. Many stories have parallels in other story collections both within and outside India (including the Bible and Aesop’s fables), and one aim of the genre seems to have been to declare that the Buddha was a source of all known stories, and the hero of most of them too!

The Buddha is also shown as being able to choose the best story to explain any puzzling situation. For example, he might tell a story of a past life in order to demonstrate the workings of karma, such that an action in the past results in an experience of the present. For example the Buddha’s honouring of holy men in his past lives led to him being honoured in his final life. Other stories are told to show how ingrained characters can be, for example lots of stories tell of the multi-life rivalry between the Buddha and his cousin, who tried to kill the Buddha in many lifetimes, including his last.

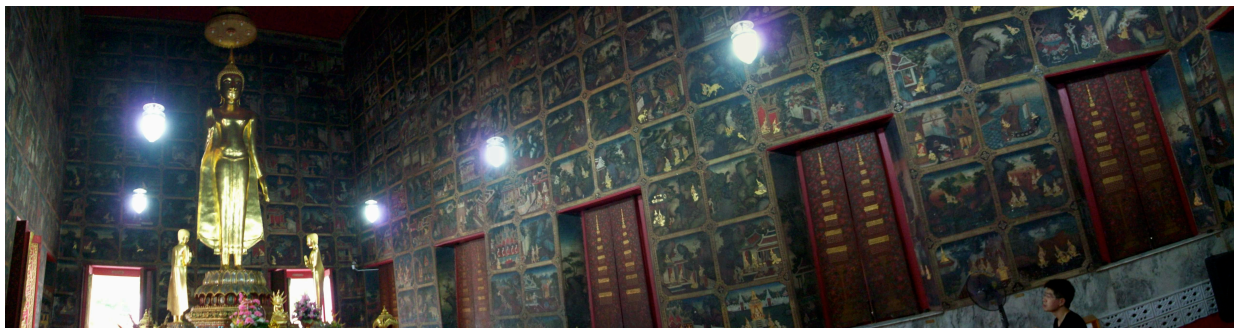
The stories as a whole are often understood as showing how the Buddha became Buddha ('Awakened One'), by practising lots of virtues and qualities throughout numerous past lives. Lists of these virtues (usually called "perfections") were compiled over time, and stories were then often read as demonstrating one or more of them. The long path to buddhahood is known as the *bodhisatta* or *bodhisattva* path.



← In this, the famous story of Vessantara, the Buddha-to-be gives away his wife and children in the perfection of his generosity (a key Buddhist ideal). The story is very popular, and is ritually re-enacted and recited at regular Buddhist festivals. Here it is illustrated in a Thai temple, Wat No.

Some stories are *exemplary*, and followers are encouraged to try to behave like the Buddha.

Others demonstrate the Buddha's amazing greatness, even in past lives, so as to inspire *admiration* and *awe*.



In this temple, Wat Khrua Wan in Bangkok, all the jataka stories are illustrated in panels on the walls. They form part of the sacred biography of the Buddha, and demonstrate the great lengths he went to in order to achieve buddhahood.

In Mahayana Buddhism the idea developed that *all* Buddhists needed to become *bodhisattvas* and strive for buddhahood over multiple lives. Jatakas then took on a new meaning as maps of the path to buddhahood. Stories of self-sacrifice or bodily gift-giving became particularly popular in Mahayana Buddhism.

Jataka stories are still used in sermons and religious teachings. They are also illustrated throughout the Buddhist world, in temples and shrines. They play an important role in Buddhist festivals (e.g. Vesak) and rituals. They are also a valued part of the literary and cultural heritage of Buddhist countries, particularly Southeast Asia, where, for example, they have been staged as operas or retold in various poetic forms.

Jataka resources

NB The main *jataka* collection contains around 550 stories in the Pali language, and was composed/compiled between the time of the Buddha (5th century BCE) and the time its commentary was fixed (5th century CE).

A full translation in turgid Victorian prose and absurd rhyming couplets is widely available online – search for E.B. Cowell's *The Jataka*. You can always make your own summaries from these!

Better translations include:

- Sarah Shaw (trans.), *The Jātakas* (Penguin Classics, 2006)
- Naomi Appleton and Sarah Shaw (trans.), *The Ten Great Birth Stories of the Buddha* (Silkworm Press, 2015)
- Peter Khoroché (trans.) *Once the Buddha was a Monkey* (University of Chicago Press, 1989) is a very accessible translation of a short Sanskrit *jātaka* text, containing 34 of the best *jātaka* stories from early India.
- Ken and Visakha Kawasaki, *Jātaka Tales of the Buddha* (Buddhist Publication Society, 2009). See also www.accesstoinight.org/lib/authors/kawasaki/
- Other retellings here: www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/buddhism/index.htm though without the Buddhist framing and with a simplistic moral summary.
- Clear Vision (<http://www.clear-vision.org/Home/Home.aspx>) also have cartoons and books for sale, especially good for younger children.
- And there are loads of printed books too, most notably the cartoon versions in the Amar Chitra Katha series from India.

When choosing versions of the stories to use, think about whether or not the story has the Buddhist framing (Is it told by the Buddha? Is it about the Buddha's past lives?) and whether there is sufficient openness about the 'meaning' of the story.

A really good secondary source for background to the *jatakas* is John Strong, *The Buddha: A Short Biography* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2001). This is a general introduction to the Buddha's lifestory, but with a whole chapter on past lives.

There is also a good chapter on *jatakas* in Kate Crosby, *Theravada Buddhism: Continuity, Diversity and Identity* (Wiley Blackwell, 2014).

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Twitter: @JatakaStories (tweeting all 550 stories one at a time!)