

The Cat and the Mice

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Keywords

Buddhism; Values and Issues: hypocrisy, appearance vs reality, wisdom, morality

Notes for teachers

The story of the cat ascetic (sometimes also identified as a jackal) is found in lots of different Indian story collections. Stories of false ascetics are an important narrative genre in early India, not only within Buddhist texts. Most likely the stories served as a popular warning against frauds who could be found amongst the many wandering hermits and teachers of the time. Blind faith is not encouraged by the Buddha. Rather, he is believed to have taught his followers to question everything he said and test it against their own reason and experience.

The heroic mouse (or, in some versions, rat) who sees the true nature of the cat is declared in this story to be the Buddha in a past life. (In other Indian versions of the story this is not the case.) The tale is therefore a “jataka” story, that is to say a story of a past life of the Buddha. For more information about the jataka genre see separate resource sheet on www.storyandreligion.div.ed.ac.uk/schools/resources

Correct understanding of reality is an important part of the Buddhist path. Insight or wisdom is a key quality of the Buddha and of all awakened beings (beings who have achieved nirvana). As such, stories of how the Buddha was able to see through deceptions or misunderstandings even in his past lives are popular in Buddhist story collections. The Buddha-to-be is also often portrayed in jataka tales as a strong leader who protects his followers and helps them out of trouble, as in this story.

That said, in this story the Buddha-to-be also transgresses Buddhist morality by killing another animal, which raises questions about the different levels of Buddhist teaching being explored in the tale. It is likely that the story was absorbed into the jataka genre from the wider Indian story pot, and so it does not make for the perfect exemplary Buddhist tale.

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Questions for Discussion

Comprehension of the story

- What does the cat do to show that he is holy?
- Why does the cat pretend to be holy?
- Why do the mice believe him?
- How does the chief mouse work out the truth?
- Why does the mouse kill the cat?

Application to other contexts

- Can appearances be deceptive?
- How can we test if something is really as it appears?
- Is it right to trust religious teachers and leaders?
- What is hypocrisy?
- Is it right that the mouse kills the cat? How else could the story have been resolved?
- Is the mouse a good leader?
- Are there different groups in society that have particular rules for animals?

Reflecting on wider Buddhist issues

- Why might Buddhists have told stories about false holy men?
- Why is the ability to see the truth behind appearances important to Buddhism?
- What Buddhist qualities or concepts does it relate to?
- Given the Buddhist prohibition of killing, is it a problem that when the Buddha was a mouse he killed a cat? Was he right to do so?
- Do different rules apply to animals and humans?

Sources / Further Reading

The story is abbreviated from *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā* number 128. It can be found in full translation in Sarah Shaw (trans.), *The Jātakas: Birth Stories of the Bodhisatta* (Penguin, 2006) or in an older translation here: <http://sacred-texts.com/bud/j1/j1131.htm>

The Cat and the Mice

The Buddha told this story about a monk who was a cheat, to show that he was also a cheat in the past.

Long ago, the Buddha-to-be happened to be born as a mouse. He was the leader of a large group of mice, and he was very large, as big as a small piglet. A cat used to roam nearby, and spotted the group of mice. He decided to find a way to make a meal of them. He took on the pose of a holy ascetic, standing on one foot, facing the sun, breathing in the air. When the chief of the mice saw him, he approached and asked, "What is your name?" "I am called the Holy One," said the cat. "Why do you stand on one foot?" "Because the earth cannot support all four of my feet." "Why do you have your mouth open?" asked the mouse. "I do not eat food, but only the wind," he replied. "And why do you face the burning sun?" "I am paying honour to the Sun-god," replied the cat.

"He must be very holy," thought the mouse, and so every day he brought his company of mice to pay respects to the cat. And every day, the last mouse to leave was caught by the cat and eaten, without the other mice noticing.

After some time, the chief mouse noticed the reduction in size of his company of mice. He began to suspect the cat, and so the next time the mice visited the cat, he made sure he was the last to leave. The cat sprang forward to catch him, but the chief mouse saw him coming and jumped up to bite his neck. "So this is your holy practice is it?" he cried out. Then he severed the cat's neck and killed him, and all the mice came and ate him up with a crunch crunch crunch. Or at least I have heard that the first ones got meat, but those who were at the back got none, for it was all gone.

The Buddha gave his teaching and explained the connection of the births: "At that time I was the leader of the mice, and the cheating monk was the cat."