

The Monkey King

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Keywords

Buddhism; Values and Issues: compassion, self-sacrifice, leadership

Notes for teachers

This is one of the most popular jataka stories in Buddhism. (For information about jataka stories – tales of the past lives of the Buddha – see separate handout on www.storyandreligion.div.ed.ac.uk/schools/resources.) It demonstrates three key qualities: compassion or concern for the welfare of others, willingness to sacrifice oneself for others, and wise leadership.

The strong leadership of the Buddha-to-be is often demonstrated in his jataka stories. Here he does his best to prevent trouble, and when trouble nonetheless appears, he does what is necessary to ensure the welfare of all of his troop, even at the expense of his own life. Compassion is a key virtue in Buddhism: Buddhists are encouraged to think about how they can help others, but also having a compassionate state of mind is something that is cultivated during meditation. Compassion is also a necessary part of the path to buddhahood, and in Mahayana Buddhism (where becoming a bodhisattva and then a buddha is the ultimate aim) there are lots of stories about extreme acts of compassionate self-sacrifice.

The imagery of a river is also significant. In Buddhist similes samsara (the constant round of redeath and rebirth) is said to be like a raging ocean or river, and nirvana (awakening or enlightenment) is compared to the further shore. In this story the monkey (the Buddha in a past life) could simply escape, as he is strong enough to reach the further shore alone. However, he chooses to help others by making himself into a bridge to the further shore, just as in a later lifetime – when he becomes Buddha – he teaches others how to achieve nirvana.

Another parallel between past life and “present” life is the role of the Buddha’s cousin, called Devadatta. In the jataka story Devadatta is the monkey who breaks his leader’s back. This characterisation is because in the “present” time of the Buddha, Devadatta tries to have the Buddha killed and to split his community.

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Questions for Discussion

Comprehension of the story

How did the humans come to find out about the mango tree?

Why did the human king want to kill the monkeys? Was he right?

Why didn't the monkey king just escape on his own?

Why is the human king so impressed by the monkey's self-sacrifice?

Are humans shown as worse than animals in this story?

Application to other contexts

What does it take to be a good leader?

Do animals and humans have the same standards of behaviour?

What causes the conflict between the monkeys and the humans? Can we learn something from this about the causes of conflict more generally?

Reflecting on wider Buddhist issues

Why do Buddhists tell stories about self-sacrifice?

Why is compassion an important quality for Buddhists?

What do we learn from this story about Buddhist ideas about the responsibilities of kings, or about leadership more broadly? How does this relate to wider Buddhist teachings?

This story is a jataka tale. What do we gain from understanding that the Buddha was the monkey king in a past life? What about the knowledge that the mean monkey was a past birth of the Buddha's troublemaking cousin Devadatta?

[Note: Pupils may be familiar with Devadatta from the story Siddhartha and the Swan, in which case you could invite comparisons between the two stories.]

Sources / Further Reading

This story is summarised from *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā* 407, which can be found in full translation in Sarah Shaw (trans.), *The Jātakas: Birth Stories of the Bodhisatta* (Penguin, 2006) or at <http://sacred-texts.com/bud/j3/j3108.htm>. Another version forms *Jātakamālā* 27, which can be found in Peter Khoroché (trans.) *Once the Buddha was a Monkey* (University of Chicago Press, 1989).

For more information about what it means to be a jataka story see separate sheet on www.storyandreligion.div.ed.ac.uk/schools/resources

The Monkey King

Long ago, the Buddha was born as a monkey. He was brave and clever, and became the leader of the whole troop. The monkeys lived in a mango tree next to a river, and were very happy eating the delicious fruits. The king of the monkeys told everyone to be careful not to let any of the fruits fall in the water, in case they should come into the hands of humans.

Despite their care, a single mango fell un-noticed into the river, and floated downstream. When it came near to a city, it was fished out and presented to the king. The king took one bite and was completely enchanted. It was the most delicious mango he had ever eaten! He wished to know where the fruit had come from, so that he could have more.

The king took a band of soldiers up the river, to try to find the source of the mango. Eventually they reached the large mango tree, weighed down with fruits, but full also of monkeys greedily consuming the tasty mangoes. The king, wanting all the fruits for himself, ordered the soldiers to shoot the monkeys.

The tree was surrounded, and there was no way for the monkeys to escape. They were terrified, all except their leader. He calmly surveyed his options, and using his immense strength he leapt across the river. Once on the further shore, he found a strong creeper and tied one end around his waist and the other around a sturdy tree. Then he took a huge leap back across the river and grabbed hold of a branch of the mango tree with his hands. There he stayed, making a bridge for his followers.

All the monkeys ran across this bridge, over the river to safety. They tried to go gently, but it was nonetheless very painful for the monkey king. The last monkey to cross was the king's cousin, a bad-tempered and mean monkey. As he crossed, he jumped on his leader's back, breaking it.

The king, meanwhile, watched all these events in amazement. How could even a monkey show such compassionate concern for his subjects, he wondered. He ordered the soldiers to help the injured monkey to the ground. He placed the monkey-king on a seat and paid him honour. The monkey king, with his dying breath, gave the human king a teaching about the duties of rulers to look after their citizens.