

The Story-cycle of King Shibi

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Keywords

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

Notes for teachers

King Shibi is famous across Buddhist, Jain and Hindu legend. In the Buddhist tradition he is understood to have been the Buddha in a past life, demonstrating his extraordinary willingness to give. As such, this story is a jataka, or a tale of a past life of the Buddha. (For more information about the jataka genre see resource sheet on www.storyandreligion.div.ed.ac.uk/schools/resources/)

Generosity or giving is a key value in Buddhism. It demonstrates important Buddhist virtues such as **detachment** (towards the thing given), **compassion** (for the recipient in need) and **faith** (when the gift is given to a member of the Buddhist community or the Buddha himself).

In early India the most worthy recipient of a gift was a **brahmin** (a member of the Hindu priestly caste), which explains why most recipients of the Buddha-to-be's generosity in Indian Buddhist stories are brahmins (or gods in disguise as brahmins). **Shakra** (also known as Indra, and found in Hindu and Jain stories as well as Buddhist ones) is a god that is well known for testing the virtue of humans.

For Buddhists, the most worthy recipient of a gift is a member of the Buddhist monastic community or the Buddha himself (either in person or as an image or bodily relics). Giving a gift to the monastic community is compared to planting a seed in a fertile "field of merit" since it results in much positive karmic fruition.

For the Buddha in his past lives, however, there are not normally any Buddhists to give to, since he is in a time before Buddhism (or, more accurately, between Buddhist dispensations). Instead, he tends to practice more extreme forms of giving, such as giving away body parts, sacrificing his life, or giving away his wife and children. These gifts are made to all sorts of recipients whether "worthy" or not. This extreme giving demonstrates his extraordinary resolve to attain buddhahood,

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but it is not usually considered necessary for normal Buddhists to emulate him, as they can instead give more moderate gifts to the Buddhist community. That said, some minor form of emulation does occur: Buddhists are encouraged to donate blood, and to be organ donors, for example, and Sri Lanka (in which the story of King Shibi is particularly popular) has a huge number of donated corneas.

Questions for Discussion

Comprehension of the story

Why did Shibi want to give away parts of his body? Why couldn't he be satisfied with giving away money or other things like that?

Why did Shibi give away his eyes even though the blind man would not be able to use them?

Why did Shibi offer his own flesh to save the life of the dove? Was this necessary?

Why do the gods test King Shibi? What might their motivations be?

Application to other contexts

What sorts of gift are good to give?

Does it matter who receives the gift, or whether the gift is useful?

Is generosity always a good thing? Is it possible to be too generous?

Reflecting on wider Buddhist issues

Why did/do Buddhists use stories to illustrate the importance of giving?

Why is giving important in Buddhism?

What does it mean for this story to be a jataka story? What can we learn from it about the qualities of the Buddha?

Should all Buddhists give the same sorts of gifts as the Buddha did in his past lives?

What does this story tell us about the Buddhist attitude to the body?

The great generosity of King Shibi is also described in Hindu stories. What might the advantages be of the Buddhists telling their own stories about this famous king?

Sources / Further Reading

This resource brings together two of the many stories about King Shibi. The gift of eyes is told in *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā* 499 - <http://sacred-texts.com/bud/j4/j4063.htm>.

The gift of flesh to ransom a dove is not currently available in accessible translation.

The Story-cycle of King Shibi

King Shibi was a very generous king, who always gave whatever was asked of him.

One day a blind man approached the king. "What can I give you, sir?" asked King Shibi. "Your eyes," replied the blind man. Without hesitation the king plucked out his eyes and gave them to the man. The man revealed himself to be the god Shakra* in disguise, who had come to test the extent of the king's generosity. He praised the king and magically restored his eyes, granting him divine sight, before disappearing back to his heavenly realm.

One day a dove flew into the king's palace and landed on his lap, begging for refuge. "I grant you safety, little bird," said the king. But then a falcon approached and demanded the dove for his meal: "I have been chasing this bird and need him for my dinner! Hand him over!" The king refused, saying, "I have offered him protection, and so I cannot allow you to eat him." The falcon was angry: "How can you offer refuge to this dove and not to me? I am starving hungry and will surely die if I don't get my meal. Will you protect his life at the expense of mine?" The king offered the falcon all sorts of food but the falcon was not interested, insisting "I only eat freshly killed meat!"

So King Shibi offered the falcon some flesh from his own thigh, equivalent to the weight of the dove, as an alternative, and the falcon agreed. "Bring out some scales!" cried the king. He placed the dove in one pan of the scales, and to the horror of all those around him he began slicing off his flesh and placing it in the other pan. But however much flesh he put in the scales, it never seemed to equal the weight of the dove. In the end, the king climbed up into the scales himself, offering his whole body in order to save the dove.

At this moment the dove and the falcon revealed their true identities as gods who had come to test the extent of the king's generosity. They praised King Shibi highly, and he became renowned throughout the world for his willingness to give.

The Buddha told these stories about King Shibi to demonstrate the importance of giving. He identified himself as having been King Shibi in a past lifetime.

* Shakra, or Indra, is king of the gods, and he enjoys testing the virtue of human beings. In Buddhism, gods are long-lived but still subject to death and rebirth according to their karma.