

Jatakas: The Buddha's Moral of the Story



The Buffalo and the Monkey – Mahisa Jataka

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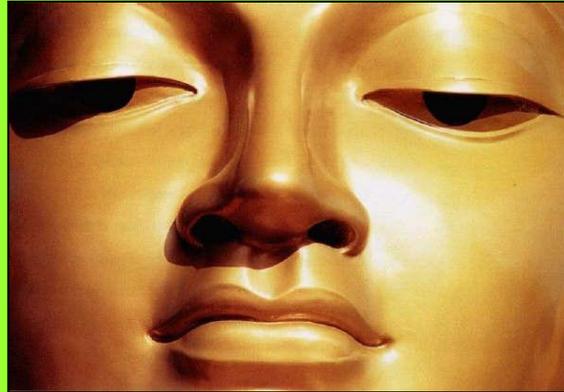
How old is Buddhism?

The [Buddhist Canon](#) as it exist today was settled at this Council and preserved as an oral tradition.

5th Century B.C.E.

Where was the Buddha born?

Nepal



Who is the founder of Buddhism?

[Siddhartha Guatama](#), the historical Buddha: conventional dates: 566-486 B.C.E. (According to more recent research, revised dates are: 490-410 BCE).

How many people in the world are Buddhists?

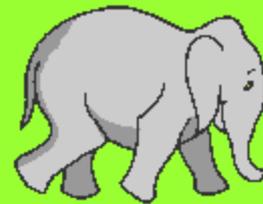
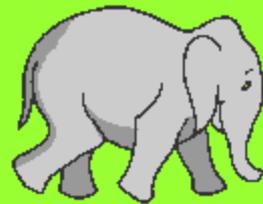
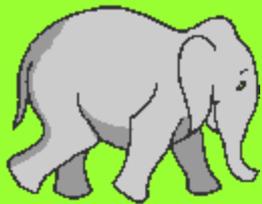
350 Million+, fourth largest religion in the world

What are **jatakas**?

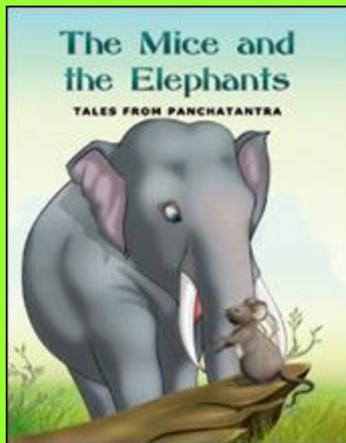
Jatakas are Buddha's birth stories and there are about 500 stories.



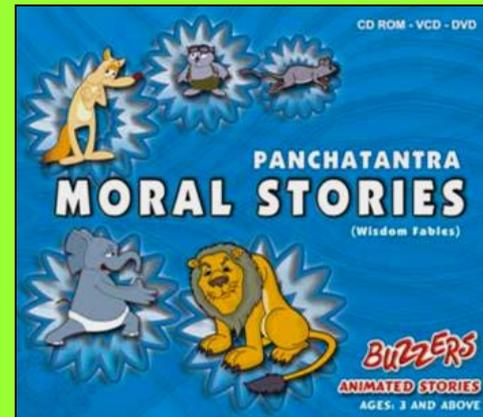
“The Jatakas are Buddhist parables and tales – loose parallels of the [Panchatantra](#). They tell the tales of Buddha in his previous lives (when he was called Bodhisattva or Buddha-to-be), which included incarnations in the form of a snake, a tiger and even an elephant. These stories reflect the travails and experiences that he had to go through to attain the wisdom of the Buddha.”



“Panchatantra: (Sanskrit: *Five Books*), famous Indian collection of fables and other morally instructive tales. The *Panchatantra* belongs to the literary genre of mirror for princes, intending to teach wisdom to future rulers. Its five books treat the following topics: **(1)** disunion of friends, **(2)** gaining of friends, **(3)** war and peace, **(4)** loss of possession, **(5)** consequence of rash action. The author of the *Panchatantra* is unknown.”



Examples of
current
Panchatantra
story books.



“Panchatantra.” *The Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales*. Oxford University Press, 2000, 2002, 2005. Answers.com 12 Jan. 2008. <http://www.answers.com/topic/panchatantra>

Why teach Jatakas? Teaching the Jatakas as Buddha told them is nearly impossible, but learning them is still interesting and useful.

Buddha taught his disciples the Jatakas as a means to illustrate the travails that each one experiences in their life and the lessons to be learned.

Often learning the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path were daunting. But to have a concrete moral or lesson explained via one of the Jatakas helped the new disciple further grasp the meaning of the story: the moral.

Therefore, when reading the Jatakas, it is helpful to ask: What was the moral or lesson of the story? Which **precept** was the lesson in the lifetime of the Bodhisattva?

Learning the Jatakas of Buddha is like reading Aesop's fables or one of the many Panchatantra.

An illustration
for the jataka:
Self-Sacrifice.



The Five Precepts of Buddhism

Not everyone could become a monk or nun, devoting their life to study and meditation. The Five Precepts were the minimum obligations for monks and laypeople. They also answer the question: “What should I do to lead a good life and to achieve liberation from rebirth?”

- **Do not kill anything** (human, beast or bug) It is worse to kill larger animals because more force is involved.
- **Do not steal** or take anything that belongs to others. Prevent others from profiting from human suffering or the suffering of other species on earth.
- **Do not engage** in sexual misconduct.
- **Do not lie, speak poorly of others, or gossip.** Practice loving speech and active listening.
- **Do not use alcohol and recreational drugs.**

Useful Buddhist terms to know:

Bodhisattva : A Buddhist saint, someone who lived on earth and knowingly gave up a chance for Nirvana in order to help others on earth.

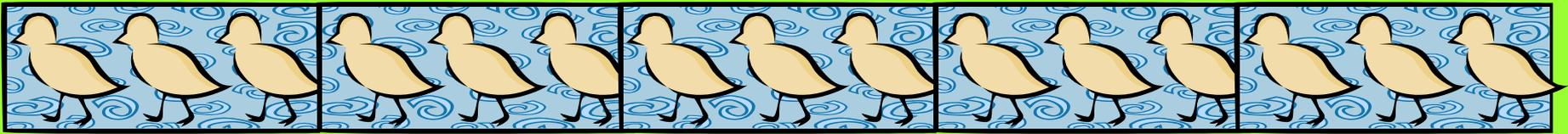
Nirvana: from the root 'nirva', to blow out, extinguish. Hence, when all desires and passions are extinguished the highest bliss or beatitude, reunion with the Supreme Spirit, may be experienced

Dharma: This is the universal truth common to all individuals at all times, and it is regarded as one of the primary sources of Buddhist doctrine and practice.

Karma: The law of Karma ensures accountability for every thought, action and word. Each has an effect on this and future lives.



***The Sleeping Buddha
on his way to Nirvana.***



Jatakas

Aesop's Fables

Buddhist literary tradition; predominantly influenced by Indian-Asian culture and geography.	Ancient Greek Literary tradition: predominantly influenced by morals of Western society, and the Panchatantras.
<i>Law of Karma</i> controls the reincarnation of any sentient being.	<i>Cause & Effect</i> explains the moral of the story and duality in each character.
Historical teaching tool used by Buddha (490-410 BCE) for disciples.	Aesop(620–560BCE),Greek slave used the parables as teaching tools.His existence is still controversial!

Aesop's fables and the [Panchatantra](#) share about a dozen tales, leading to discussions whether the Greeks learned these fables from Indian storytellers or the other way, or if the influences were mutual.



Use Wisdom, Don't Rush

What do the monkeys appear to be doing?
What does the blue monster represent to you?

The Lion & The Rabbit

A Fable from India

The animals of the forest made a bargain with a ferocious lion who killed for pleasure. It was agreed that one animal each day would willingly come to the ferocious lion's den to be his supper and, in turn, the lion would never hunt again. The first to go to the lion's den was a timid rabbit, who went slowly.

"Why are you late?" the lion roared when the rabbit arrived.

"I'm late because of the **other** lion," said the rabbit.

"In **my** jungle? Take me to this other lion."

The rabbit led the lion to a deep well and told him to look in. The lion saw his own reflection in the water and roared! The sound of his roar bounced right back at him as an echo.

"I alone am king of this jungle," he roared again.

His echo answered him, "I alone am king of this jungle."

With that, the lion became so enraged, he charged into the deep well with a great splash! The lion attacked his own reflection and was never heard from again.

Example of a Panchatantra that is similar to the Aesop fable of The Jackal and the Pigeons





The Phony Holy Man

A Jataka tale about
hypocrisy!

See handout.

The Ant and the Chrysalis

An Ant nimbly running about in the sunshine in search of food came across a Chrysalis that was very near its time of change. The Chrysalis moved its tail, and thus attracted the attention of the Ant, who then saw for the first time that it was alive. "Poor, pitiable animal!" cried the Ant disdainfully. "What a sad fate is yours! While I can run hither and thither, at my pleasure, and, if I wish, ascend the tallest tree, you lie imprisoned here in your shell, with power only to move a joint or two of your scaly tail." The Chrysalis heard all this, but did not try to make any reply.

A few days after, when the Ant passed that way again, nothing but the shell remained. Wondering what had become of its contents, he felt himself suddenly shaded and fanned by the gorgeous wings of a beautiful Butterfly. "Behold in me," said the Butterfly, "your much-pitied friend! Boast now of your powers to run and climb as long as you can get me to listen." So saying, the Butterfly rose in the air, and, borne along and aloft on the summer breeze, was soon lost to the sight of the Ant forever.



"Appearances are deceptive."

Compare this Aesop's Fable to the Jataka of the *Phony Holy Man*

Internet resources used: direct links to websites.

[Aesops' Fables Online Collection](#)

[Animal gifs](#)

[Buddhist studies](#)

[India Site](#)

[Sakyamuni Sambuddha Vihara & Buddhist Vihara Victoria Inc](#)

[Stories in a Nutshell](#)

[World Tales](#)

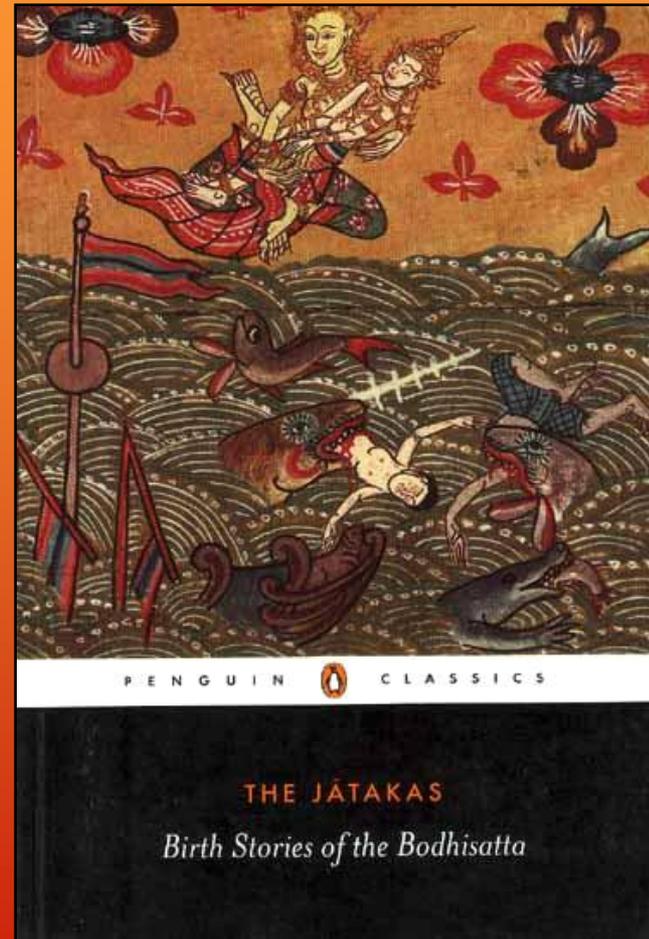
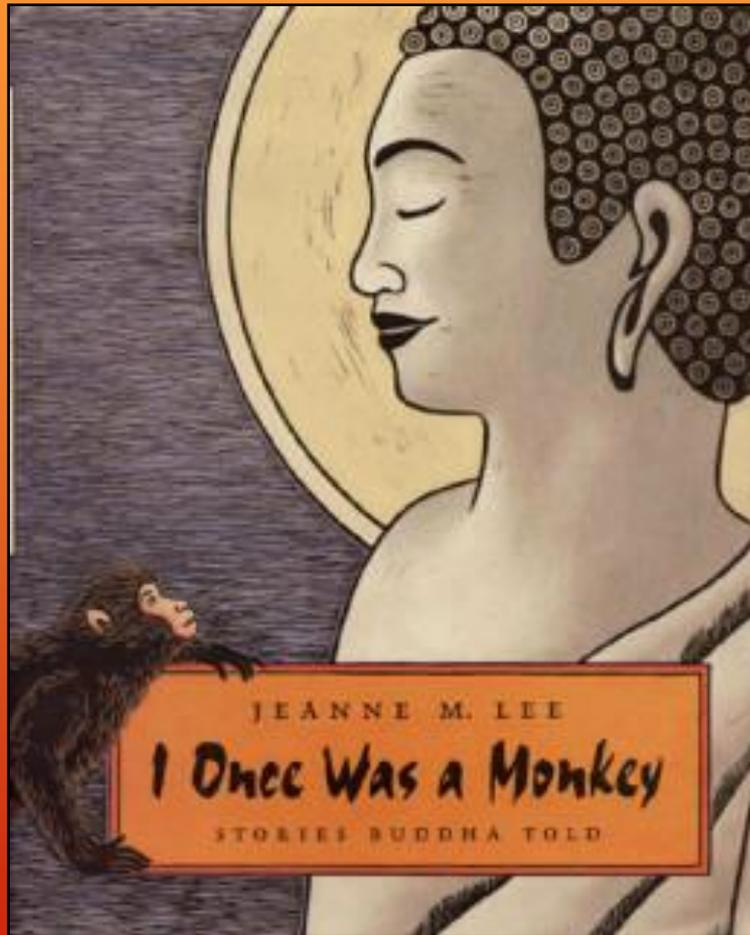


Jataka Class Activity

- Background information on Buddhist faith and origins is essential. Buddha was a person and the word “buddha” means *enlightened one*.
- Introduce the Five Precepts as the main points for each jataka as told by Buddha.
- Explain Reincarnation and Karma as taught by the Buddhist.
- Discuss morals that are taught at home and in public places like school or places of worship.
- Introduce the *Jatakas* and their connection to reincarnation and morals.
- Introduce the *Panchatantras*, because there is a cultural connection in India.
- Introduce *Aesop’s Fables*.
- Read aloud the book, ***I Once Was a Monkey*** by Jeanne M. Lee. The pictures are excellent to show students.
- Older students (gr. 9-12) would be well served by the resource, ***Jatakas: Birth Stories of the Bodhisatta*** by Sarah Shaw.

- Homework assignment : read a short Jataka, *The Wind and the Moon* and identify who the Bodhisattva was, the moral of the story and theme of the story. This is a preview as to how well students grasp the idea of the story.
- Visit some of the websites given to find the Jatakas suitable for your class to read.
- Print out copies of several of the stories and delete the images from the stories if they are illustrated. If possible, try to provide a large amount of diversity in the moral topics covered.
- Illustrate, act out or rewrite a new ending: all focusing on the precept presented and the moral of the story.

Texts used



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