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Source: *Storytelling, Self, Society*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (SEPTEMBER-DECEMBER 2010), pp. 212-222

Published by: Wayne State University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41949134>

Accessed: 26-03-2019 20:32 UTC

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Past Lives: Entering the Buddhist Imagination

Rafe Martin

This article examines the traditional, ancient Buddhist story tradition of jataka tales – tales of the Buddha’s former births. And it connects the jataka tradition with contemporary Zen Buddhist practice, as well as with the role of deep imagination in the art of storytelling and its function in our lives today.

When [the Dharma] . . . is internalized it is most naturally taught in the form of folk stories: the jataka tales in classical Buddhism, the koans in Zen. — Robert Aitken, Roshi

Buddha fed himself to tigers
& donated mountains of eyes
(through the years)
To the blind,
a mountain-lion
Once trailed me four miles
At night and no gun
It was awful, I didn’t want to be ate
Maybe we’ll change.

Snyder, *Myths and Texts*, “Hunting” 14

Jataka tales, that is, stories of the Buddha’s past lives, have had a long and very rich history. First told, it is said, 2,500 years ago by the Buddha himself, they have ever since been sculpted, painted, carved, inscribed, written, dramatized, told, and retold by itinerant storytellers, lowly horse traders on caravan trails, as well as by professionals in the halls of the noble and great throughout Buddhist Asia. Within Buddhism itself these stories are seen as residing at the very heart’s

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core, deep down in the oldest layers of tradition and are held in esteem by all schools of Buddhist tradition — even the most iconoclastic — Zen.

One hundred years after the Buddha's death (his parinirvana or "entrance into nirvana"), the Buddhist Council of Vaisali had already accepted the jatakas as part of the canon. Almost as far back, the great third century B.C.E. carved relic shrines of Sanchi, Amaravati, and Bharut India, and the later (second century B.C.E.), magnificently carved and painted Ajanta caves, all depict jatakas, as does the immense, ninth century Southeast Asian monument of Borobudur. Great Zen masters of both China and Japan, teachers such as the eminent and redoubtable Lin-Chi (Rinzai), (eighth through ninth centuries), Yuan Wu (Engo), who in the eleventh century wrote the commentaries on the cases for one of the most important koan collections, *The Blue Cliff Record* (*Hekigan roku*), and the great thirteenth century Soto master, Dogen, in Japan, refer to them so effortlessly in their talks and writings that we must assume that their communities already had a context for the reference in place. That is, they knew the jatakas. "Bald-headed idiots! Why all this fluster?" demands Lin-Chi. "Will you put on a lion's skin and then yap like a jackal? First-rate fellows who don't draw a first-rate fellow's breath, you're unwilling to trust to what you have at home and instead go looking for something outside . . ." (*The Zen Teachings of Master Lin-Chi*, Burton Watson trans. 75). Rinzai here is, almost in one breath himself, both referring to and, at the same, time insightfully commenting on a jataka.

"When people of ancient times sought the Way, they broke their bones and took out the marrow, shed their blood to appease hunger, spread their hair to cover mud, threw themselves off cliffs to feed tigers. Even of old they were like this; what about me?" writes Engo in part of his commentary to case ninety-six in *The Blue Cliff Record*. He, too, is citing specific jataka tales. In one, the Buddha offered his own blood to a starving demon in exchange for a verse of Truth. When receiving Buddha Dipankara, the Buddha of a past world age, the Bodhisattva, who was then a hermit, placed his long hair in the mud to make a path for the Great Teacher. The episode of the starving tigress and the Bodhisattva's sacrifice is one of the major, classic jatakas.

Dogen in the "Painted Cake" section of his epic *Shobogenzo* (*Eye of the Treasury of the True Dharma*) reminds us that "painting" a Buddha, that is, bringing him or her (meaning ourselves) to life requires kalpas of unceasing effort — a reference to the Buddha's own many-lifetime path of sustained exertion, as dramatized in the jatakas. The great thirteenth Dalai Lama made it a point to comment every year at an annual religious festival on one particular jataka alone — "The Tigress" — (Engo's "threw themselves off cliffs to feed tigers"), a tale of the deepest and most selfless generosity. He felt it to be a text of endless resonance, one that demonstrated in an intimate, personal, and not philosophical or abstract way, what selflessness, emptiness, compassion, generosity, and wisdom — that is, Buddhism — were really all about.

Now these stories are in the West. Actually they have been here before. Shakespeare in *As You Like It* and *The Merchant of Venice*, Chaucer in “The Pardoner’s Tale,” Kipling in “The King’s Ankus” in *The Jungle Books*, *The Arabian Nights*, and *Aesop’s Fables*, as well as Greek tragedy (Euripides’s *Hippolytus* for one) all draw on jataka tale patterns which probably came into the West through centuries of trade (Kipling was raised in India, so his path was more direct) and through conquest. Alexander the Great’s army carried jatakas back home with them from India. One early Western scholar/commentator, T.W. Rhys Davids, even speculated in the 1878 introduction to his *Buddhist Birth Stories* (*Jataka Tales*) that *Aesop’s Fables* may actually be Greek re-interpretations of jatakas, and the name “Aesop” itself a possible corruption of “bodhisattva.” He concludes that “the fairy tales, parables, fables, riddles, and comic and moral stories, of which the Buddhist Collection — known as the Jataka Book — consists, have been found in many instances to bear a striking resemblance to similar ones current in the West. Now in many instances this is simply due to the fact that the *Western stories were borrowed from the Buddhist ones*” (*Buddhist Birth Stores* iii).

Old as the stories are, they offer some intriguingly modern perspectives. As science continues to reveal a fundamental continuity among all life-forms, and as we now contemplate the very real possibility of life on other worlds, the jatakas were already, 2,500 years ago, saying that there are many worlds, many beings, and that all living things are deeply interconnected, from gods flying around in the heavens, to animals sheltering in their dens. Animals in jataka tales think, feel, have their own unique views, and their own specialized realms.

We live it seems, in a universe of interlocked, inter-woven realms as well as many beings — in stories and in reality. (“Fish and dragons don’t see water as water. They see it as a palace.” Zen Master, Dogen, *Shobogenzo*, “The Mountains and Rivers Sutra.”)

How does a hawk see the world? A mouse? A blood-cell? An octopus? A blue whale? The jatakas take this perception through the eyes of other lives and make it their foundation, make it leap out as real. In the ancient European world, carried forward in the awfully misnamed “fairy tales” of our childhoods, this perception lives on. It is not new, it is not owned by any tradition. The prince cuts off the head of the shaggy little horse, the princess hurls the frog against the wall and a beautiful, royal human steps out from the animal skin and completes us, shows us what’s been missing, makes us whole. How old is this perception? I would venture it goes back to the Paleolithic. Since we’ve banished our own fairy tales to the nursery, if not ignored them altogether, perhaps the Buddhist jatakas can help return us now, when it is very much needed, to a vision of our actual place and role in the multileveled universe of all living beings, human and nonhuman alike.

The stories also demonstrate the workings of an ancient and perhaps at one time universal belief in rebirth. In essence, that belief holds that every living thing ourselves included, has been here in one form or another throughout beginning-less

time, and that each of us has already taken every form, had every experience and every possible adventure. As well as suffered every possible loss and made many mistakes. We have already known it all. “More than the seas is the amount of blood you’ve already shed in your past lives,” said the Buddha, “and more tears too than the water in all the oceans.” We have been around, in one form or another, for a very long time.

We can take the concept of lifetimes literally or as metaphor. Buddhism is not dogmatic on this point and schools differ. Still, do we not live lifetimes over the course of any one life? The child becomes the adult who in turn becomes the elder. We can live lifetimes in a day, an hour, a breath, every thought a new being, ourselves taking life as animal, hungry ghost, god, fighting titan, demon, or human being — the traditional six realms of Buddhist myth/psychology. Even as the jatakas uphold rebirth, they also demonstrate the workings of and depend on our acceptance of an ancient and, possibly worldwide traditional moral system, a universe of cause and effect in which generosity, courage, and kindness are highly valued, and stinginess, cowardice, and cruelty are not. The morality of the jatakas is clear and familiar, East or West. It is the most ancient morality of *ahimsa*, or nonharming, the essential ground of the Buddhist *paramitas* or Perfections, and the oft-submerged yet still palpable ethical foundation of literatures, cultures, and communities worldwide.

The tales affirm that what we experience now is causally related to our choices, thoughts and actions in the past — in other words, *karma*. In Buddhist thought this can mean going back and back, life after life into an endless past. Blake makes what is essentially the same fundamental point about cause and effect, though without reference to the deep past, in his *Auguries of Innocence*: “The wanton boy that kills the fly shall feel the spider’s enmity.”

We are not cast into the universe by blind and capricious fate. We *are* the universe itself, unfolding on an ethical plane. The evolution the jatakas speak of is not one simply of bug becoming lizard becoming mouse becoming deer and so on and on until we arrive at a human state. Instead, the evolutionary path demonstrated by the jatakas is moral and spiritual. Our deeds, not our high or low, human or animal station, are what determine our next existence. And wonderfully mysteriously, wildly even, in the jatakas an animal can be more evolved, more morally, spiritually, even practically and functionally aware than a human being.

All the jataka tales are said to be stories of the Buddha’s own past lives. We may think of the Buddha as a prince born 2,500 years ago, in India, who, as a young man, facing the painful realities of birth, becoming, aging, sickness, and ultimately, death, became determined to find a path beyond these terrors. After six years of unrelenting effort, the legend goes, he attained full and perfect enlightenment and then taught others from the foundation of that experience how they might also find meaning, freedom, and joy in the midst of the terrors and disappointments of impermanence itself. In a Buddhist context, what the jatakas

reveal is that that effort did not come out of nowhere. Past exertions give rise to present ones. The Buddha had been working on those issues for lifetimes and lifetimes, ages and ages, not always successfully. The jatakas show him making efforts and failing, falling down, trying again. He might be a mouse, a tree spirit, an ascetic, the king of the gods, or even a foolish jackal in one life and a robber, a merchant, a deer, a lizard, a wise crow, an acrobat, an untouchable, a spirit of the air, a poor working stiff, or an enlightened sage in the next. He sees everything, accomplishes much, works to benefit others, and sometimes has to take himself in hand, apologize for his failings and mistakes, and try again. Essentially what we see him working on in the jatakas, actualizing, gaining strength with, are the “ten items of good character,” the previously mentioned *paramitas* or “perfections” as they are known in Buddhist teaching: generous giving, morality, forbearance and patience, vitality, focused meditation, wisdom, compassionate skilful means, resolve, strength, and knowledge.

For all their lofty idealism, the jatakas can be weird and they can be tough-minded to the point of being unnerving. In actualizing the perfection of giving the Buddha can reach a point where he will give his eyes to a beggar or his body as food to a starving tigress. In perfecting patience he can allow his own body to be cut to pieces by an angry king — and not feel remorse or fear; in fact, not give rise in his mind to *any* self-centered or *any* self-locating thought at all. In perfecting himself, the Buddha, with many years of disciplined meditation to his credit, so purified he can fly through the air, might see the naked body of a queen and fall head over hills in lust, and then have to struggle to find his way back to his deeper vows and purpose. He cannot do it — not, that is, without the help of the very woman he’s fallen for. The story reveals that his spiritual practice, for all its splendid achievement, was still not yet fully integrated into his daily life. And so, back to work he goes, back to the sitting hall, and back to the endless inner work of character development.

Though some jatakas can be great children’s stories, especially those of the Buddha’s animal-births, these are not actually nursery tales. Nor are their ethics always agreeable to contemporary sensibilities. There are some really horrifying tales in the Pali Jataka (the collection of 550 tales with accompanying canonical verses, all in Pali) clearly the work of later, monastic authors, in which women are given a hard time, essentially, merely for being beautiful and desirable. Inveighing against the so-called “wiles” of women, the jatakas fail to live up to their own high ideals and can leave a sour taste. Keep your wits about you if you choose to go to the original sources and read the Pali *Jataka* or even the elegant Sanskrit *Jatakamala* (*Garland of Jatakas*) of Arysura. You will be in for a wild ride.

Despite this, the jatakas remain a deep and very traditional part of Buddhist tradition. In the West, Buddhism has been most often viewed through the lens of psychological interpretation. Psychology and Buddhist practice do have enough in common to make this a realistic and practical connection. What it leaves out is the deep fervor of the Bodhisattva Path:

antidote to the practice of Zen “safari,” in which people set out to “bag” a kensho and, then, once they have met that goal, give up on further practice. Instead, the jatakas encourage us to take the long view and walk what is traditionally termed the Great Way, the way of the endless dropping of self, of endless *practice*. Through these stories of the Buddha’s past lives along this Great Way, we can also renew our empathy with all life and regain a felt connection to animals as thinking, suffering, caring, aspiring beings, not machines in fur. We may recognize that they, too, as individuals, are on a Path, each responsible for finding his or her own way. Is it true? Is it fact? Science keeps edging us closer to such a view. Recent findings reveal that wasps can recognize individual wasp faces, and that dogs might be as intelligent as a two-and-a-half-year-old human child.

At the least, it is a vision of life that we would all be the poorer without: lonelier, and more inclined to do hurtful deeds that, in the end, only harm ourselves. Most native traditions as well as our own Western poetic tradition (think of Blake!) uphold this view. It is not simply Buddhist. It is a fundamental view, an imaginative perspective that for countless generations human beings have found helpful in their efforts to live well. The jatakas allow us to reenter this world and *feel* it. Our own lives benefit from this actual sensed, imaginative re-connection with the countless living beings with whom we still share our earth. There is healing in that, and not just for us but for the earth and animals. Where we find sympathy, indeed unity, we are less likely to cause harm. Ecological wisdom and action arise most naturally out of a felt connection, not simply out of rational arguments usually based these days on a painful deluge of disturbing facts.

Refining our thoughts and actions, the jatakas affect the way we live our daily lives by placing them in the context of a universal moral system, one that does not rely on religious belief to be upheld or justified. That morality was based on clear observation of the unswerving logic of cause and effect. Native communities that hunt for food know that taking a life — any life — is dangerous, an act fraught with potentially dire consequence. Hunting rituals, therefore, always involve prayers of respect, love, and requests for forgiveness. To take a life, even to eat and so to live oneself, opens a door to sacred responsibilities, to *karma*. Let us eat our wild-caught salmon but not forget to offer a small, silent prayer of gratitude for receiving our life from its death. The Buddhist imagination extends compassion to all living beings, not just humans. “From the very beginning all beings are Buddha,” is the Zen expression of this as it appears in the “Zazen Wasan,” “Song of Zazen” of the great, eighteenth century Japanese Zen Master Hakuin. The jatakas demonstrate this in detail and in specific action.

Finally, it is out of the imagination that we create our lives. Athletes know this better than scholars. If you want to swim better, visualize yourself in the pool, the water flowing smoothly past, the chiming, churning sound of that flow, the kick of your legs, the perfect effortless stroke. What happens in the imagination affects us, even makes us who we are. As Yeats says, “In dreams begin responsibilities.”

Stories are the tools that our ancestors worldwide passed down to us, an impressive technology, if you will, to refine the inner life, to improve our dreaming.

This goes against the grain of a certain contemporary view that Buddhism, especially Zen, the school I know best, is not about dreams and imaginings but rather about reality and truth. The salvation Buddhist practice offers is, in this view, freedom from all such old-timey “fluff.” In fact, I have even encountered some practitioners who hold that imagination is the furthest thing from Buddhism and useless to its practice. But we could just as well assert the opposite — that Buddhism, Zen included, is a great engine of wish and dream. In fact, the Bodhisattva ideal, the core of Mahayana Buddhism of which Zen is one aspect, might be said to depend almost entirely upon the power of Imagination itself. To vow to save all beings one must not simply imagine, but one must imagine bravely, totally, immensely, and deeply. Why commit oneself to a small dream, tediously emptying a vast ocean by the teaspoonful, when a great dream can encompass everything, even Truth itself, and swallow up the entire universe in a single gulp?

The word “imagination,” like “myth,” can for us, today, summon opposing connotations. The popular meaning of myth is that it is something “false.” This is not what I mean by “myth” or “mythic.” Myth, as I am using it, means, essentially, something so true it cannot be put into one final linguistic or imagistic form. It underlies all forms. It is a story truer than words can say. As for imagination, I do not mean it in the sense of fantasy, reflection, daydreams, thoughts, insights, or the stream of internal vision and thought, where we are isolated, withdrawn, and separated from whatever is before us. I mean *Imagination*, as in the sense of infinite creative potential, the realm we might enter in meditation (zazen) when body and mind fall away: emptiness that is neither static nor dull but free (empty) of all limit, that is, a realm of infinitely creative potential, the realm out of which we dream/create our very daily lives. It is where the highest we can imagine is the same as what IS. It is the state one might experience in watching the night dances at Zuni Pueblo where plants, birds, thoughts, galaxies, and stars enter the plaza as living dancing beings. “There is a dream dreaming us,” is a Bushmen saying pointing to this realm. It is the Empty realm of Reality. Blake says, “The imagination is not a State: it is the Human existence itself.” Again from the opening of *Auguries of Innocence*, it is simply:

To see a world in a grain of sand,
And a heaven in a wild flower,
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,
And eternity in an hour.

So, what we currently term reality, as it turns out, is simply another dream, an *imagining* and somewhat limited one at that. In the end, reality and imagination, stories and Mind cannot be separated. Not only are they not two, but they are not even one. In *Eihei Dogen: Mystical Realist*, Hee-Jin Kim wrote:

The meaning of impermanence is not prior to, or independent of, the fact of impermanence. They are mutually identical and interdependent. In other words, myth is reality and reality myth. Dogen did not believe, as the modern world does, in a dualism between reality and myth in which reality is construed as isolatable from myth, so as to attain a progressively greater degree of objectivity; rather his purport was to clarify, purify, and reinforce myth — that is, Buddha-nature — in order to see and touch reality as it was. (166)

And Dogen himself:

If you say the painting is not real, then the material phenomenal world is not real, the Dharma is not real. Unsurpassed enlightenment is a painting. The entire phenomenal universe and the empty sky are nothing but a painting. Since this is so, there is no remedy for satisfying hunger other than a painted rice cake. Without painted hunger you never become a true person. — Zen Master Dogen, “Painting of a Rice Cake.” (Snyder, *Mountains and Rivers* ix)

One of the central koans (literally “public record”) in the venerable *Mumonkan* (*Gateless Gate* or *Gateless Barrier*) collection of koans and commentaries by the early thirteenth century Chinese Zen Master Mumon (Wu-men) is its second case, that of “Hyakujo’s (Pai-chang’s) Fox.” The case itself is essentially a folktale about karma and essential nature in which a head priest is reborn 500 lifetimes as a fox. Wu-men’s pithy comment on the case ends, “If you have the eye to see through this you will appreciate how the former head of the monastery enjoyed his five hundred happy blessed lives as a fox.” Here Mumon might be making a sly reference to the jatakas. In the jataka tradition the Buddha himself lives (essentially) five hundred past lives before stepping forward and making his final, total effort to embody the Way, thereby becoming a Buddha, Shakyamuni, the Buddha of this historic period. Mumon’s implicit reference touches an interesting and classic point — that is, were any of those 500 previous lives any less “Buddha”? The Zen question here is — are any of our lives now?

The Buffalo Jataka number 33 in Aryasura’s self-consciously literary *Jatakamala* (*Garland of Jatakas*), begins:

According to tradition, the Bodhisattva was once a wild buffalo living in a remote forest. Caked in mud, his body looked like a dark cloud walking along. Though as an animal his mental state was so dim that it was difficult for him to recognize what was right, he was by no means idle in the pursuit of good, thanks to his sharp discernment. As though bound by long service, Pity never deserted him. Either his previous actions or his own nature had some influence on his being as he was, which, indeed is why the Lord spoke of it being impossible to judge the rightness or the rewards of on one’s actions, since he who has the soul of pity was nevertheless born as an animal and in that state could still recognize what was right. Without one’s actions the continuous chain of existences would not occur. Nor can a good action have bad results. So despite his awareness of

what was right he must have entered such low states because of some slight traces of previous actions. — *Once the Buddha Was a Monkey, Arya Sura's Jatakamala*. (245)

Aryasura raises a similar point to Mumon's, though more literally and with greater complexity. It is a point that is explored in greater depth further along in the koan curriculum, reappearing in the *Shoyoroku (Book of Serenity)*, a koan collection with strong Soto roots, as case number 18, "Chou-chou's Dog," an "extended version" of *The Mumonkan's* famous first case, that of the "Mu" koan. The voice of a mythic Zen runs like quicksilver through the koans, turning back and forth on the fundamental point of karma and essential nature. And behind that remain pointers to the Buddha's past lives, as brought to life through the Dharma folklore of the jatakas. In other words, the jataka tales are part of the pervasive and very traditional context of Buddhist practice and aspiration, and as such can speak meaningfully to us, even today.

I think now that reading jataka tales is only a first step toward a larger literary "catch and release" program. First we find the stories and make them our own. Reading is the start. It's the "catch" phase. But then we have to internalize them, "get" them, let them work on us, let them whisper to us, evolve and change us. Then we have to — or should at least try to — *tell* them. Performance is a way to actualize the hidden life of these tales, which is our own life, as we step forward with them from the top of a hundred foot pole — a traditional Zen image of residing still incomplete in calm emptiness — and actively bring them back into the life and minds of our families and communities, releasing them once again, for the sake of all beings, back into the mind-stream of our culture and time. In *Back on the Fire*, Gary Snyder writes that "[p]erformance is of key importance because this phenomenal world and all life is, of itself, not a book but a performance" (64).

Recently I had a chance to tell the jataka tale of "The Banyan Deer" as part of a benefit performance for a Zen Center. In the tale, a deer, trapped in a stockade, finds a way to save not just himself and his herd but also all beings. Later, after the performance, it struck me in a way I had never experienced quite so viscerally before — "Where *did* these stories, these jatakas, come from? Where was the person we call the *Buddha* coming from? How do we explain this? Here is a 2,500 year old story, a deeply religious story, that puts unlimited compassion into the mind of an animal, and upholds this as *bona fide* Highest Truth, demonstrating a level of selfless compassion that we now, at the start of the twenty-first century, might only just be beginning to be able to acknowledge as possible or even desirable. These stories are so inexplicably *strange*, that they might just be . . . True!"

I think now that there may be things that can only be learned from stories by telling them, not simply thinking about them. Embodying a story with our own voices, bodies, and minds, the three traditional gateways of Dharma practice, we may encounter something more tangible and real than we had dreamed.

Author/storyteller Rafe Martin's work has been featured at the National Storytelling Festival, Joseph Campbell Festival of Myth and Story, American Library Association, Zuni Pueblo, NASA, and the annual gathering of American Zen Teachers-among many others. He is also an ordained Zen practitioner with many years of Dharma practice. He is the author of *The Hungry Tigress: Buddhist Myths, Legends and Jataka Tales* and the forthcoming books *The Banyan Deer* and *Endless Path: Awakening in the Buddhist Imagination*. For more information on his work go to www.rafamartin.com.

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