

# Why I Use Jataka Tales in My Zen Teaching

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Within 100 years of the Buddha's parinirvana, (death) jataka tales were accepted as canonical within Buddhist tradition, not as children's tales but as powerful and essential adult teachings. Taken as a whole, jataka tradition has had a tremendous effect on the popular imagination of all Buddhist countries and traditions. Jatakas were a primary way of teaching, and while noted Zen teachers like Lin-chi and Hseuh-t'ou in China, and Dogen and Hakuin in Japan, make clear reference to them, Zen tradition on the whole, has left jatakas pretty much un-explored. Until now and the work we are doing together through our annual Jataka sesshin at Endless Path Zendo, at the Vermont Zen Center, the Toronto Zen Centre and Casa Zen in Costa Rica.

Why have I made them — along with the Harada-Yasuntani koan curriculum — a cornerstone of my Zen teaching? There are several reasons. Jatakas can help give Zen practice a clear ethical foundation. This is important for lay Zen practice as the precepts are typically not explored in koan curriculum until the very end of our formal koan work. As lay practitioners are not in monasteries but out in the world, where complex ethical choices abound, jatakas can give our ongoing practice real life foundations. Roshi Kapleau used to say “Zen is not above morality, nor morality below Zen.”

Additionally, jatakas reconnect us with the living world, the world we are trashing these days because, cut off from and unaware of our own real selfless Self of stars, rivers, trees, people, animals and the great wide Earth, we simultaneously remain isolated from all other living things. With increasingly tragic and dire consequences. So, Zen practice-realization, aligned with jatakas and their deep sense of the individual aspirations of all living things, can help heal and shift that by returning us to a truer vision of the actual world — one which modern science is itself now actively supporting as well.

Finally, jataka tales show us the Way of the Bodhisattva, not as an intellectual ideal, but as an actual, lived reality. In these tales we get to see the Buddha making mistakes, stumbling and correcting himself as he goes — which is how he matures. It offers a model of ongoing effort and aspiration and the innate perfectability that is perfectly possible to all. This is deeply encouraging for who, even while trying to align with the Good, has not made mistakes?

While the jatakas present us with a high ideal — that we can mature beyond self-centeredness, realize Original wisdom and compassion, and become able to selflessly aid all beings — they also encourage us to squarely face and deal with, not avoid or

hide from, our own errors and shortcomings. (The path to hell is, indeed, paved and littered with good intentions!) In short, whatever problems we're now facing, whatever issues we're now dealing with, in some past life — as the jatakas show — the Buddha dealt with these same things, too.

We are in this together. The Way of the maturing Bodhisattva, which is the whole point of Zen practice and training in a nutshell, is not far off but intimately at hand.