

JATAKA

(Birth Stories Of The Buddha)

By Upasika Marie Harlowe

The Teachings of Buddhism are now so vast that there is much room for concern over what might be the original and basic teachings of Gautama, and what might be additions through the ages, made by many interpreters, particularly since it must be remembered that nothing of the Teachings was put into written form until several centuries after the Great Decease.

One such segment of Buddhist literature about which there is much controversy as to its authenticity, is the JATAKA, the Birth Stories of the Buddha, presuming to be an historical account of the previous incarnations of Gautama Buddha, as he passed through many forms of life, including once as a frog, a hare and a dog; twice as a pig, four times as a cock and a serpent; six times as an elephant, ten times as a lion, eleven times as a deer.

Also Gautama was reported in the JATAKA to have lived, among other forms, twice as a thief, once as a devil-dancer; twenty times as Indra and twenty-four times as a Brahmin, fifty eight times as a king, eighty-three times as an ascetic; four times as Maha Brahma. But never once as a woman. Thus through a long chain of successive personalities, Gautama made his way to Perfect Buddhahood, where no further births were necessary.

Birth Stories

These birth stories have accordingly been read with both critical and sympathetic interest. Probably the greater part of Buddhists believes that these Stories were first taught by Gautama himself, but this is an error. Nowhere is there any record of Gautama having presented these stories himself. As a matter of fact, they were first presented as holy legends, decades after his passing. Indeed, Gautama taught that there is no soul existing separately from the body after death that man should renounce the 'clinging to existence'. How then could there be a soul-transmigration in re-incarnated forms?

The JATAKA Tales are the most ancient and complete collection of folk-lore extant in the world today. They are ancient, but no ancient history. (It should be remembered that historical dates have always been the weak point in Indian literature and history). The Tales are at least as old as the Buddhist canon compiled at the Council of Vesali, 377 BC.

After the death of their Master, the followers of Gautama, as is usual, in devotion identified Gautama's most memorable characteristics with personages

of folk-lore already extant in India, Gautama Buddha was identified with certain renowned ancient sages in an effort to relate their Teacher as a successor to earlier prophets, identifying him with the heroes of popular fables.

The historical Buddha was never shown in old sculpture directly, and it was only much later that a composite picture of these several earlier sages was presented as picturing the Buddha, and Gautama became a superhuman, deified by the Birth Stories. Much of this lore preserved its Indian origin more than the latter Buddhist pattern, as is abundantly clear in the content of the Tales – explaining why many Buddhists find the Tales difficult to understand as “Buddhist” Tales.

When the Council of Vesali was held it was true that a great schism had taken place already in early Buddhism. It was here that the Canon was re-arranged.

The Dipavamsa reported changes made at the Council. It was here that stress was given to the Bodhisat ideal of the Bodhisat developing through many efforts and lives to become eventually a Buddha. Already, in this Council, the Northern Buddhist had changed the face of primitive basic Buddhism. Some years later than this Council, the Birth Stories were taken to Ceylon by Mahinda, and there, later translated into Sinhalese by Buddhaghosha in the 5th Century, A.D. It is this version which is most well-known today, there is, however, a shorter collection than the whole voluminous book compiled at the Council.

Still Exist

A few early copies of the Birth Stories still exist in Tibet, Nepal and elsewhere. Arya Sura, the Northern poet, who transcribed some 24 of the Stories before his death, intermingled and added a flowery prose to them. Sura evidently lived before 434 AD when a Chinese translation was made from his translation from Pali into Sanskrit.

Prof. J. S. Speyer translated Sura’s collection in 1895. Prof. Rhys Davids made a translation in 1880; in 1882 R. Morris translated the *Cariya Pitaka* for the Pali Text Society; in 1877 V. Fausball translated the Stories into seven volumes in London; and in London in 1895, E. B. Cowell translated them in six volumes at Cambridge; also in London (Oxford) H. Kern made a similar effort (in 1895).

Aside from these scholarly translations the JATAKA Tales are found in widely separated and different expressions the world over, in the common miracle plays and religious dramas, and in the fables of many lands. Through a curious migration of fables from country to country, the Stories have spread into fields which are not always aware of their origin. For instance, Aesop’s Fables were not written by Aesop, but were put together in the 14th Century at Constantinople, by the Monk Planudes, who drew largely from JATAKA.

The Fables of Bobrinus in the 1st Century B.C. were used by Phaedrus in the 1st Century A.D. and having in turn been brought from India in the 4th Century B.C. In the 6th Century another version of which no Sanskrit original is now available, was an old Persian one, done into Pahlavi, and it was in succeeding centuries translated into Arabic, Greek, Hebrew, Latin and all modern European languages.

Very Popular

In the 8th Century one of the Stories came into the Greek literature as “Barlaam and Josaphat” and became very popular in Europe, where it was translated into Latin and seven other European languages, including the Ice-landic. Josaphat, the Bodhisat-the Buddha, was canonized by Christian Church in the 8th Century!

If one does not lose sight of the truth that the JATAKA Buddhist Stories were never taught, or probably even known, but Gautama himself – that indeed the Buddha taught in his philosophy that no eternal soul exists, one can nevertheless derive great benefit from a study of these Tales. There is a certain amount of truth and morality in all Fables. These Buddhist Birth Stories must be considered in three aspects: 1. The Tales themselves. 2. The frame-work of their origin and development. 3. Their interpretation on the widest and deepest scale.

The stories have a loftiness of moral thought, and beyond a belief in metempsychosis, they have a wider claim than mere externalism. If forms are often exaggerated, the spirit of the Dhamma is there also. Something more than a craving for existence in future births is there. The Teachings run through every Story.

What man has been makes him what he is, and what he is will make him be what comes in the future; there is an irresistible force of all actions working as the only act of creation recognized in Buddhism. In Buddhism every man’s destiny is dependent on his own acts. “As from a lump of clay a workman make what he pleases, even so a man obtains whatever destiny he has wrought out of himself”.

The virtues of love and pity are stressed. A mother who loves only her own child learns a boundless love for all beings even for all sentient life. When a Buddhist can feel the suffering of pain even of animals, he understands and pities the whole sentient world. One of the most popular of the Stories is when Gautama as a Bodhisat in a previous birth, gave his body to be eaten by a mother tiger so that she could nourish her starving young.

Another much recited story of the Buddha’s earlier life was as King Vessantara, when he gave to everyone who asked for, even his prized possessions, including a valuable white elephant, and in the end, gave even his children. Incidentally, it

is reported that Arya Sura, the translator of the Stories, also gave his life to be devoured by a starving tigress.

In the Stories, which certainly need not be rejected out-of-hand, one can perceive the Teaching of an unbroken chain of cause-and-effect, of justice in a world of the suffering of the innocent.

The Stories of the Buddha's continuing lives need not be points in history, but are rather situations in all lives which arise many times. The Buddha is more than a human figure in Time. The Buddha's Life is eternal as ever-changing Time-and-Space.

Weekend (Ceylon)