

Stories - The Golden Deer

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Today I offer another Jataka tale. These tales or fables are about the former lives of the Buddha. They carry values that ancient Indian Buddhists held and wanted to convey to others.

You get a very different feel for Buddhism from the stories that are told – how people relate to each other, the values and virtues that are emphasized. You get a sense of what Buddhism emphasizes concerning how to live as opposed to what to believe or understand philosophically or metaphysically. Jataka tales belong to the values of another time and place. Some aspects may be a little hard for us in the modern world to appreciate. But some parts of these fables seem universal.

This story is about a golden deer – a magnificent deer with golden fur, antlers of shining silver, and eyes like sparkling, radiant jewels. The deer was very wise. But because of its beauty, hunters often searched for it. They wanted to capture and have the golden deer as a trophy. So it would go deep into the woods and hide in inaccessible places to be safe. The deer was content there because it liked to meditate. It would sit and meditate, becoming wiser and kinder in the process.

So the golden deer was in its hiding place, a thicket of woods close to a river. Just upriver was a city where a wealthy merchant had died, leaving his wealth to his son. His son, who was a bit of a playboy and a gambler, started to spend the money quite extravagantly on all kinds of things. Pretty soon, he spent all the money. Not only did he spend it all, but he also went into deep debt.

Eventually, creditors came after the son to get their money back. Since the son had nothing to offer them, he devised a plan – a trick up his sleeve. It was an ill-thought-out plan that he made up on the spot. He said to the creditors: “Come, I have money for you. I have a treasure buried in the sand next to the river. Let us go down there and dig it up. You will have your money back.”

So the crowd of creditors (he had a lot of debt) and the son walked down to the river. On a steep and sandy embankment, the son pretended to slip. He slipped intentionally and fell into the river’s raging water. His plan was for him to be swept away by the river so that the creditors would think he had drowned and would no longer chase after him for their money.

And, in a sense, that is what happened. The son feigned slipping, fell into the river, and got swept away. But it turned out that the river was very strong and wide. There was no way for him to get back onto the shore. The river carried him a long way. After a while, he thought: “This is serious. I cannot get back to shore. I am cold, and I am going to drown. Things are difficult here, and greater rapids are coming up.”

So the son started calling out for help. The golden deer heard his cries. The deer said, “Well, as long as I am alive, I am not going to allow anyone to die whom I can help and save.” The deer dashed out of the thicket, jumped into the river, and swam out to where the son was. It ducked under the water, came up underneath the son, picked him up on its back, and then swam back to shore.

By this time, the son was quite cold and weak. Hypothermia had set in. So the golden deer brought him into its secret thicket. Over the next couple of days, it nursed the son back to health. The deer brought fruits and nuts from the forest. It gave him water and kept him warm. Slowly, the son revived and became better.

The son thanked the golden deer, saying: “This is quite something. Can I do anything in return?” The deer replied: “Yes. I will bring you back out to the road so that you may return to your city. But please, promise that you will not tell anyone where I live so I can stay safe.” The son said: “Yes. I promise.”

So the golden deer carried the son through the woods and showed him the road to the city. The son then returned to the city, but no one recognized him after so much time had passed. Or he may have gone to a different city.

After a while, the queen of the country had a dream. She dreamt of a wise golden deer with silver antlers and gem-like eyes. She was intrigued. She desired that wisdom and wished to be a student of the deer in her dream. She asked her ministers to please find and bring back the deer so she could learn its wisdom. But no one knew where the deer was.

So a proclamation was sent out through the city announcing that whoever found the golden deer for the queen would receive a big treasure. The son heard this and said: "Oh! I know where the golden deer is." He went to the queen and said, "I know where it is, and I can bring you there" – thus breaking his promise to the deer.

The queen assembled her soldiers and people. They brought spears and arrows because they were a little afraid to go into the woods. Once there, they started to circle the deer's hiding place. The deer heard the noise. It could see the spears, arrows, and soldiers through the trees. It said: "Oh. I will be captured."

So the golden deer stood up, and in a stately and calm way, it walked to the queen and her party. Seeing the big deer walk right up to her, she became a little scared. She pulled out her bow and arrow to protect herself. But something about the non-threatening nature of the deer's approach caused her to not let her arrow fly. The deer said: "What are you doing here? Who brought you here? How did you find me?" The queen replied, "It was this young man here who showed us the way to you."

The golden deer said, "There is an ancient saying: Better to rescue a log from a raging river than to save a person like you." The queen did not understand. She said, "What do you mean?" The deer replied: "This man was drowning in the river. I plunged into the great river, fought the rapids, and brought him back to shore. I nursed him back to health. Then he promised he would never tell anyone where I was so that I would stay safe."

The queen was horrified to hear that the golden deer had risked its life to save the young man who then betrayed the deer. She picked up her bow and arrow and said: "You are a traitor. You have betrayed your promise. It is terrible what you have done." The golden deer said: "No! Do not shoot! You promised the young man that you would give him a treasure if he brought you to me. He should receive the treasure. But maybe, you can banish him from the queendom."

So that is what the queen did. The son left with his treasure, never to return to the country. Then the queen said to the golden deer: "Please come with me to the palace. I want to learn from you. In return, I will grant any wish you want." The deer replied, "Please pass a law that no one is allowed to injure, hurt, or kill any animal in the queendom." The queen said: "Okay. That will be a new law."

Everyone returned to the palace. The golden deer taught the queen, her ministers, and many of the people of the capital the beautiful virtues of kindness, friendliness, generosity, and truthfulness. Everything went well until the animals started eating the farmers' crops. The farmers tried to stop the animals, but they could not chase them away. They could not injure or kill the animals because of the new law. Everyone was in an uproar.

So the golden deer went out into the world and told all the animals: "Do not eat the people's food. They need to be able to grow food to support themselves. They are not going to kill you, but do not take their plants and crops." The animals agreed to leave the crops alone. In this way, the kingdom became vegetarian, and the animals were safe.

This story may be a fantastical fable, but it has a lot of interesting lessons. It teaches the value of preserving and saving a life. It teaches dedicating oneself to helping others, even at the risk of one's own life. That is a hugely important value of ancient Buddhism, which you see in many stories.

Truthfulness is another tremendously important value in the story – to speak the truth and then adhere to it, especially if you have made a promise. There is the value of not harming. There also seemed to be a trend of vegetarianism in certain parts of ancient Buddhist India so that no animals were killed or injured.

That is the story for today. Just as the golden deer stayed in a secret place to cultivate great compassionate care and wisdom – so may you go to your secret place of meditation. May it be a place where you develop kindness, compassion, truthfulness, and care for this world. May you be the great golden deer who is wise. Thank you.