

This story about the future Buddha and his mother is a *jataka* story, that is, it is a story about the Buddha's previous births in which he practiced and developed the virtues that he was to fully realize once he became enlightened. There are many *jataka* stories and they form the most popular genre of literature across the Buddhist world from India to Japan. In some stories, the future Buddha is a human, in others, as here, he is an animal. Whatever kind of birth the future Buddha has in a *jataka*, all of the stories about the Buddha's previous lives provide rich opportunities for we humans to think about how we can best live with and for others. What this means is that in the *jakatas*, we see Buddhism as a practical religion, concerned with everyday ethics, and we also see in them the power of Buddhism as a religion of the heart.

Representations of scenes from the stories of the Buddha's previous births are found in friezes at early Buddhist sites like Bharhut, generally dated to about 100 BCE to 100 CE, and thus the *jakatas* are, besides being widespread, also the earliest form of Buddhist literature for which we have any material historical evidence. Western scholars in the past too-often dismissed the *jakatas* as "simply excrescences that were super-added to a pristine Buddhism" without, however, very much actual historical support for such a judgment (Obeyesekere 1991: 229-230)

Jataka stories generically have three parts: a *story of the present*, which provides the contextual frame for the telling of a *story of the past*. In the third part, persons known in the present are identified with the characters in the story of past. A striking part of that conventional *jataka* structure is that here Mahaprajapati Gautami, the Buddha's adoptive mother, is identified with his birth mother in the past; a Pali version of the story identifies the blind mother with Mahamaya, the Buddha's birth mother in the present.

That Pali version of the story is found in the *Jataka* collection included in the Pali canon of the Theravada Buddhist traditions of Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia. A depiction of the joyous reunion of the two elephants is found in a painting at Ajanta, a Buddhist site in western India dating from the fifth century, CE. (see below; image found at <http://arttreasuresindia.blogspot.com/2015/11/>). The modern Indian artist Badri Narayan painted a watercolor in 1960 of the king feeding the elephant delectables (see below, image found at: <https://jnaf.org/artist/badri-narayan/>)

The version of the story translated here is from the *Mahavastu*, "The Great Story." The *Mahavastu* is a very eclectic text composed in a form of Sanskrit that once was used by Buddhists; the text dates from about the second to the fourth centuries of the Common Era. It seems that the *Mahavastu*, as we now have it, once was included in the literature of monastic discipline (*Vinaya*) of an Indian Buddhist school that no longer exists, the Lokottaravādin School. The *Mahavastu*'s contents are diverse, with stories of the Buddha and his disciples juxtaposed with doctrinal discussions and general schemas of Buddhist practice. There are more than 40 *jataka* stories in the *Mahavastu*, generally introduced in connection with some event or relationship in the Buddha's life, as the story here is told in connection with his relationship with his adoptive mother, Mahaprajapati.

The broad theme of a son caring for blind parents, and especially for a blind mother, is found in other *jataka* stories, including some of the most famous of them, such as the story of the future Buddha as Syamaka (known as Sama in Pali), which is also included in the *Mahavastu* (for artistic representations and a telling of the *Sama jataka* from Thailand, see <http://www.buddha->

[images.com/sama-jataka.asp](https://www.images.com/sama-jataka.asp); see also Garling 2021: 76-80 for another story on this theme as well as an exploration of this version of the story from the *Mahavastu*.)

Further Readings:

A full translation of the *Mahavastu* is available in:

Jones, J. J. (trans.). 1949-1956. *The Mahāvastu*. 3 vols. London: Luzac and Company.

A translation of the Pali version of the story is available at:

Cowell, E. B. (ed.). Chalmers, Robert, W. H. D. Rouse, H. T. Francis, R. A. Neil, E. B. Cowell (trans.). 1895–1907. *The Jātaka or Stories of the Buddha's Former Births*. 6 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. vol. IV, pp. 58-61

which is available online at: <https://suttacentral.net/ja455/en/rouse>

Other Readings:

Garling, Wendy. 2021. *The Woman who Raised the Buddha* (Boulder, CO: Shambala).

Obeyesekere, Gananath. 1991. "Buddhism and Conscience: An Exploratory Essay." *Daedalus* 120: 219-239.



The Loyalty of an Elephant towards His Blind Mother

From the Matriposhaka Jataka, Ajanta Caves, Gupta Period, 5th Century CE



<https://jnaf.org/artist/badri-narayan/>