



The Jātaka stories, or 'birth stories' are tales which originally came from local folklore and were adapted as teaching aids as Buddhism spread throughout Asia from India. The stories depict the Buddha in former lives or 'incarnations', both human and animal, and usually portray him showing great compassion, thus serving as moral fables in a similar way to the Parables used in Christianity. The Jātaka stories appeared frequently in Buddhist art as a way of teaching illiterate people the morals of Buddhism. Many such examples can be seen in wall paintings at Buddhist cave complexes such as at Mogao near Dunhuang on the Silk Road.

Look at the following images from cave number 257 at Dunhuang. The three images follow on from one another and depict 'The Ruru (or deer) Jātaka'.

**Can you work out the story from the images?
See if you were right overleaf.**



Deer Jātaka on a wall painting at Dunhuang, Cave 257. Courtesy of the Dunhuang Academy



The Ruru Jātaka, or the Tale of the Deer of Nine Colours

The Buddha once lived in a lush forest as a beautiful deer with a gleaming multicoloured coat which glimmered like jewels. Wary of hunters, the deer was careful to stay hidden from view and had never been seen by those who frequented the forest. One day the deer was alerted to the cries of a drowning man who had fallen into a fast flowing river flooded by rain. With no regard for his own safety, the deer plunged into the water and dragged the drowning man to the riverbank. The man was very grateful and he pledged to be forever in the service of his rescuer. The deer would hear none of it, but asked the man to protect him from hunters by continuing to keep his existence a secret. The man promised never to tell anyone about the deer.

One day the queen of the country dreamed of the multicoloured deer in the forest and demanded that he be found and brought to her. A reward was posted, promising riches and land to whoever should find and capture the deer. The man who had been rescued by the deer was good but very poor and eventually, overwhelmed with guilt, he went to the palace and offered to lead the king's hunters to the deer.

When the deer heard hunters approaching and saw the man he had rescued with them he called out in a human voice. Explaining who he was, and asking who had led the hunters to him, he explained that he had been betrayed by a man whose life he had saved. The king was angry and berated the man, but the deer explained

that the temptation of riches was too much for some people to resist and that such desire weakens integrity. The king, upon hearing such wisdom agreed to pay the man his reward and also granted the deer freedom to walk the forest without fear. In gratitude for this freedom the deer offered his services to the king. The king asked the deer to return with him to the palace and to become a teacher of the Dharma, or Buddhist path. He accepted and was welcomed as an honoured guest. At his welcome banquet the deer preached to the guests.

His teaching explained that despite all the complexities of the Dharma, its central message was clear and simple; have compassion and respect for all living beings. The king promised that from then on, all animals in his kingdom would be protected.

How might you apply the moral offered in this Jātaka story to situations in your own life?

Do you think the cave painting from Dunhuang illustrated this story clearly? Would you have been able to work out what was happening from the painting alone?

