



Jataka Tales

Twelve animal wisdom tales from India

CLASSIC STORY SHELF · THE ACTIVE HOME

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The Monkey and the Crocodile



A monkey lived in a tall tree on a riverbank, and below him in the river lived a crocodile. Every day the monkey dropped sweet rose-apples down to his friend.

One day the crocodile said, "My mother is sick, and she longs to taste a monkey's heart. Come home with me." The monkey could not swim, so he climbed onto the crocodile's back.

In the middle of the river, the crocodile began to sink. "Why are you diving?" cried the monkey. "I am taking you to my mother," said the crocodile.



The monkey thought quickly. “What a pity you didn't tell me before we left! I keep my heart hanging on a branch of my tree. Take me back, and I will fetch it for you.”

The crocodile turned and swam straight back. The monkey leaped onto the bank and scrambled to the very top of the tree. “My heart is up here, Crocodile,” he called down. “If you want it, you must come and get it!”

From that day, the monkey chose his friends more carefully — but he never stopped being quick and clever.

Lesson: Quick thinking can get you out of trouble.

Words to know: rose-apple — a sweet, rosy fruit that grows near rivers in India · **clever** — quick at thinking of smart ideas

The Turtle Who Couldn't Stop Talking



A turtle lived in a pond at the foot of a hill. Two wild geese often visited him, and the three became great friends.

One day the geese said, "Our home is far away, and we must fly back tomorrow. Turtle, would you like to come with us?"

"I have no wings," said the turtle sadly. "We will carry you," said the geese, "on a stick. You must bite the middle of the stick — and you must not say one word until we land."



The next morning the geese held the ends of the stick, the turtle bit the middle, and up they flew.

Down below, the village children pointed and shouted, “Look at the turtle flying! What a funny sight!” The turtle wanted to shout back, “It is none of your business!” He opened his mouth — and down he tumbled.

But the grass at the edge of a pond was soft, and the turtle landed with a bump in the mud. He climbed out slowly. “Next time,” he said, “I will keep my mouth shut.”

Lesson: Sometimes the wisest thing is to keep quiet.

Words to know: wild geese — large birds that fly long distances to find food · **tumble** — to fall and roll over

The Quarrel of the Quails



Many quails lived together in a forest, and the wisest quail was their leader. A hunter had learned to copy the leader's call, and every day he caught quails in his net.

The leader told the flock, "The next time the net falls, every quail must poke her head through a hole in the net. Then, all together — flap! We will fly away with the net and drop it on the thorn bush."

The next day the net fell — and flap! All the quails rose together, carried the net away, and dropped it on the thorns. The hunter went home with nothing.



But a few days later, one quail bumped another as they landed. “You trod on my head!” “I didn't mean to!” Soon the whole flock was quarreling.

The leader shook his head. “Quarrels will feed the hunter,” he said. “If the net falls while we fight, no one will lift.” The quails hung their heads — and just then, the net fell!

“Together — flap!” cried the leader, and every quail lifted at once. Away flew the net to the thorn bush. The quails never quarreled again.

Lesson: Working together keeps everyone safe.

Words to know: **quail** — a small, round bird that lives on the ground · **fowler** — a hunter who catches birds

The Merchant of Seri



Two merchants traveled from town to town selling pots and pans. One was greedy, but the other was honest and kind.

In one town lived a poor grandmother and her little granddaughter. All they had left from richer days was one old bowl, which they kept on a shelf.

The greedy merchant came first. He scratched the bowl with a needle and saw at once that it was solid gold. But he wanted it for nothing, so he said, "This old thing is not worth a penny!" and threw it on the ground.



Then the honest merchant came. He held the bowl and said, "This is a golden bowl. Everything I own is not worth as much as this. I am not rich enough to buy it."

"Take it," said the grandmother, "and give my granddaughter some little dish." But the honest merchant would not cheat her. He gave her all his money and all his fine wares for the bowl, keeping only eight pennies for the boat ride home.

When the greedy merchant hurried back, hoping to grab the bowl, it was gone. Being greedy had cost him a fortune. Being honest had made his friend rich.

Lesson: Honesty is worth more than gold.

Words to know: **merchant** — a person who buys and sells things · **wares** — the things a merchant has to sell

The Measure of Rice



A king had a servant called the Valuer, whose job was to set fair prices for horses, elephants, gold, and jewels. The Valuer was honest, and his prices were always just.

But the king was greedy. He sent the honest Valuer away and gave the job to a foolish peasant who knew nothing about prices.

A horse dealer brought five hundred fine horses to the palace. The new Valuer looked them over and said, "These horses are worth... one measure of rice." So the dealer was paid one small measure of rice for five hundred horses!



The honest Valuer whispered a plan to the dealer. The dealer gave the foolish Valuer a handsome present and asked, “You say the horses are worth a measure of rice. But what is a measure of rice worth? Tell us before the king!”

Before the king and all his ministers, the foolish Valuer puffed himself up and declared, “A measure of rice is worth — the whole city!”

Everyone burst out laughing. The king turned red with shame. He sent the foolish Valuer away and brought back the honest one, whose prices were fair ever after.

Lesson: Know the true value of things before you trade.

Words to know: **valuer** — a person whose job is to set fair prices · **measure** — an amount measured out, like a scoop of rice

The Foolish, Timid Rabbit



A rabbit was sleeping under a palm tree. He woke with a start and thought, "Oh! What if the whole earth should break up? What would become of me?"

Just then, high above him, some monkeys dropped a coconut. THUMP! It landed right behind the rabbit.

"The earth is breaking up!" squealed the rabbit, and he ran and ran without ever looking back.



Another rabbit ran after him. “The earth is breaking up!” he cried, and soon hundreds of rabbits were running. A deer joined them, then a fox, then an elephant — all running from the breaking earth.

The Lion, King of Beasts, roared three times, and everyone stopped. “Who saw the earth breaking up?” he asked. The elephant blamed the fox, the fox blamed the deer, the deer blamed the rabbits — and at last they came to the first little rabbit.

The Lion carried the rabbit back to the palm tree on his broad back. There on the ground lay the coconut. “It was only a coconut falling,” said the Lion. “You foolish, timid rabbit!” And all the animals walked home — slowly.

Lesson: Don't panic over a noise you haven't checked.

Words to know: **timid** — easily frightened · **coconut** — a large, hard fruit that grows on palm trees

The Banyan Deer



In a forest lived a deer as golden as the sun, with horns like silver. He was king of the Banyan Deer, and his herd was five hundred strong.

The king of that country loved to hunt. His people built him a park, drove both herds of deer inside, and shut the gate. Every day the king's cook came to the park for one deer — and every day the deer trembled and ran in fear.

The Banyan Deer King said, “Let us take turns, one deer each day, so that the rest may live in peace.” And so they did.



One day the turn fell to a mother deer with a tiny baby. She begged her own king to let her wait until her baby could live without her — but he refused.

So she went to the Banyan Deer King. “Go back to your baby,” he said gently. “I will go in your place.”

The next day the cook found the golden king waiting in her place. The king of the country hurried to see. “You would give your life for a mother and her baby?” he said. “Rise! I grant her life, and yours — and from today, no one shall hunt the deer ever again.”

Lesson: A good leader protects others, even at cost to himself.

Words to know: banyan — a huge tree from India with many hanging roots · **herd** — a group of animals that live together

The Princes and the Water-Sprite



A king had three sons: the Prince of the Stars, the Moon Prince, and the Sun Prince. Fearing trouble at the palace, the king sent his two older sons to live in the forest — and the youngest ran after them, for he loved his brothers.

In the forest they rested beside a deep, still pond. “Sun Prince,” said the eldest, “go down, drink, and bring us water.”

But a water-sprite lived in that pond, and he had power over everyone who entered the water —

except those who could answer his question: “What are the Good Fairies like?”



“Like the sun and the moon!” said the Sun Prince.
“Wrong,” said the sprite, and he pulled the boy down to his cave under the water. The Moon Prince went next and answered, “Like the sky above us!” —
“Wrong,” said the sprite, and pulled him down too.

Then the eldest prince came, saw the footprints going into the water, and waited with his sword ready. When the sprite appeared, the prince answered truly: “The Good Fairies are like the pure in heart — kind in word and kind in deed.”

“Wise Prince,” said the sprite, “I will return one brother. Which one?” — “Bring me the younger,” said the prince, “for our father sent us away for his sake, and I could never leave him behind.” The sprite smiled — and brought back both brothers.

Lesson: Wisdom and kindness together can save the day.

Words to know: **sprite** — a small magical being of the water · **pure in heart** — honest and kind all the way through

The Ox Who Envied the Pig



On a farm lived two oxen brothers, Big Red and Little Red, who pulled all the carts and plows.

The farmer's daughter was going to be married, and for the wedding feast the farmer was fattening a pig. Every day the pig was given the finest food on the farm.

Little Red munched his plain straw and sighed. "Big Red, you and I do all the hard work, and we eat straw. That lazy pig does nothing, and he eats like a king!"



“Envy him not, little brother,” said Big Red. “That pig is eating the food of death. His fine meals are fattening him for the wedding feast. Eat your straw, and live long.”

When the wedding day came, Little Red understood at last. The pig's easy life had been very short.

“Our straw is plain,” said Little Red, “but we have years of sunny fields together.” And he never envied the pig again.

Lesson: Be glad of your own life — the grass isn't always greener.

Words to know: **envy** — to wish you had what someone else has · **feast** — a big, special meal for a celebration

Grannie's Blackie



A kind woman everyone called Granny had raised a baby elephant named Blackie. The village children rode on his back, and Blackie swung them high in his trunk — but Blackie never did any work at all.

One morning Blackie saw that Granny was growing old, and her hands were tired from working. “I am young and strong,” he thought. “It is my turn to work for her.”

Down at the river, a man's wagons were stuck: his oxen could not pull the heavy loads through the shallow water. “Two pieces of silver for every wagon your elephant pulls across!” the man promised.



Blackie pulled one wagon after another through the river. But when the man counted out only one piece of silver for each wagon, Blackie would not touch the money. He stood right in the middle of the road and would not move.

The man laughed and counted out the rest. "An honest wage for honest work!" He tied the bag of silver around Blackie's neck.

Blackie ran straight home. "Now you shall rest, Granny," he said, "and I will do the work." And from that day, he did.

Lesson: When you love someone, you find a way to help.

Words to know: **granny** — a loving name for a grandmother · **wage** — money paid for work

The Crab and the Crane



One summer, very little rain fell, and the pond where the fishes lived grew smaller every day. A crane sat on the bank, watching.

“Dear fishes,” said the crane, “I know a deep, shady pond in the woods, full of water. I will carry you there, one by one, on my back.”

The fishes sent their biggest fish to look first. The crane showed him the fine pond — and then, one by one, he carried the fishes away. But he did not take them to the pond. He took them to a tree in the woods, and there he ate them.



At last only a crab was left in the drying pond.

“Come with me,” said the crane sweetly.

“I will come,” said the crab, “but not on your back. Let me hold your neck tightly with my claw.” The hungry crane agreed.

In the woods, the crab saw no pond — only a pile of fish bones under the tree! He squeezed the crane's neck with all his might. “Take me home,” he said, “or I shall pinch harder!” The crane begged and flapped and carried the crab safely back. Then the crab warned every creature at the pond: “The crane's kind story was a trick!”

Lesson: Pay attention — a trickster's story may not add up.

Words to know: **crane** — a tall bird with a long neck and long legs · **pinch** — to squeeze tightly between claws or fingers

Why the Owl Is Not King of the Birds



Long, long ago, the people chose a king, the animals chose a king, and the fishes chose a king. Then the birds gathered on a great flat rock. "We birds should have a king too!" they cried.

They talked and talked, and at last they agreed: "Let us make the Owl our king. He looks so wise!"

But one old crow stood up. "Wait!" he said. "Look at the Owl this very minute, while everyone is shouting for him. See how sour and cross his face is!"



“If that is his happy face,” said the crow, “what will he look like when he is angry? I, for one, do not want a sour-looking king!”

The crow flapped up into the sky, crying, “I don't like it! I don't like it!” The owl chased after him — and that is why, to this very day, owls and crows are enemies.

The birds chose a gentle turtle dove for their king instead, and everyone flew home.

Lesson: Choose leaders for their character, not their looks.

Words to know: **sour** — cross and unfriendly · **turtle dove** — a small, gentle bird with a soft cooing song

About this book

The twelve Jataka tales are animal wisdom stories from India, told for more than two thousand years. They were retold for children by Ellen C. Babbitt in 1912 and are in the public domain. These retellings, and the illustrations, are original to The Active Home.

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