

Animals Go To Heaven

by Piya Tan

The Buddha teaching is unique amongst the world religions: it is not only for humans and gods; it is also for animals. There are numerous stories that relate how animals who associate with good humans or are well treated, go to heaven after they die.

The first example is that of the Bodhisattva's HORSE Kanthaka. The Introduction to the Jataka Commentary (which is one of the earliest records we have of the Buddha's early life) tells us how when the Bodhisattva Siddhattha renounces the world, his horse Kanthaka is so deeply saddened that he dies broken-hearted, but obviously with a wholesome last thought-moment. He is reborn as the deva Kanthaka in the heaven of the Thirty-three Gods (Sakra's heaven).

The next famous animal story is found in the story of the Buddha's solitary retreat in the Parileyya. The Vinaya (V 1:337-357) records how in the 10th year of the ministry, when a dispute arises amongst the monks of Kosambi who even tell the Buddha off when he tries to counsel them. After trying hard to reconcile them and failing, he quietly leaves for a solitary retreat in the Parileyya forest where he is attended by a like-minded ELEPHANT (he leaves his own tribe for the joy of solitude). Watching how the Buddha prepares warm water every morning the elephant Parileyyaka himself prepares it for the Buddha. He also offers the Buddha wild fruits and takes care of his robe and bowl.

A MONKEY, watching the elephant, offers the Buddha a honeycomb. Later, however, in his excitement, the monkey falls on a sharp stump, immediately dies and is reborn in the heaven of the Thirty-three Gods. So too the elephant, who becomes the deva Parileyyaka. This full story is given in the Dhammapada Commentary (see "Buddhist Legends," book 1 story 5).

Then there is the well known story of the FROG deva in the Vimana Vatthu (Vv 852-88). It is said that once a frog sits listening to the Buddha teaching. Although not knowing human language, it is captivated by the Buddha's soothing voice. As he listens entranced, a farmer, leaning on his pole, immediately pierces him to death. The frog is reborn in the heaven of the Thirty-three as Manduka Deva (the frog deity). He appears before the Buddha in all his glory to sing his praises. (The full story is given in the Vimana Vatthu Commentary: see "The Minor Anthologies" vol 4 pages 102 f.)

One of the longest stories in world literature, that is, the Udena cycle, found in the Dhammapada Commentary (book 2 story 1). It is actually a cycle of nested stories spanning many lives leading to the Buddha's time. In one of the stories, during a plague, a poor luckless wandering man named Kotuhalaka reaches a herdsman house and is given some food. The herdsman feeds his DOG with the same food. Kotuhalaka looks with envy at the dog. That night, Kotuhalaka dies from over-eating, and his thinking about the dog leads him to be reborn as the bitch's puppy.

Now, a pratyeka Buddha (a solitary fully self-awakened Buddha who does not establish his teaching) regularly comes to the house for alms, and the dog (Kotuhalaka) takes a liking to him. When the pratyeka-buddha finally leaves, the dog is saddened and dies. The

commentators remarks that dogs, unlike humans, are straightforward and lack deceit. So upon dying, he is reborn in the heaven of the Thirty-three as a deva.

One of the most famous animal stories is that of the Abhidhamma bats. The Dhammapada story (book 14 story 2) tells us in an interesting aside, that 500 youths, witnessing the Buddha perform the twin wonder (a miracle of fire and water radiating from his body), decide to go forth under Sāriputta. It is said that in Kassapa Buddha's time, they were BATS living in a cave where two monks were reciting the Abhidhamma. So enthralled were they by their sound, although not knowing its meaning, they pass away into the heavens, and are reborn in Sāvattihī. (See "Buddhist Legends" 3:51 f)

The point of all such stories, I think, is that we should treat animals well. When animals (like humans) dies in a peaceful way, they are likely to be reborn in a better state where they go on to come in contact with the Dharma so that they attain spiritual liberation. Anyhow, it is nice to know that our pets or the animals we knew have been reborn as devas and have us to thank for their good rebirth! Let us then love life and love lives. This year we should spare some kind thoughts especially for the ox.

A very Happy New Year of the Ox.

090119