

The Jataka Tales Come to Vermont

by Josh Kelman

This was not your ordinary sesshin. The schedule had three full time days and four more going to work each day. And in place of teisho, Rafe Martin told Jataka stories complete with background, commentary and discussion. The Jataka tales, stories of the Buddha's past lives, opened up before us and we entered them.

Rafe has been working with these stories for decades. They have been part of his Zen practice. A gifted writer and storyteller, he presented fresh translations and comments targeted specifically to us; contemporary Zen students attending sesshin. What a delight! It wasn't simply a case of being enchanted by the stories themselves and Rafe's telling. We plugged into a hitherto unexplored, by us, part of our rich Buddhist tradition.

Rafe presented a landscape of the background of the Jatakas. Well known when Buddhism was flourishing in Asia, they are teachings in story form from a time when stories, in all cultures, were used to communicate great truths. Truths too great to be encapsulated in mere facts, Rafe has said. They are the same teachings as the rest of our practice, but we are able to get inside stories and experience the teaching in a fresh, intimate way

We heard tales of the Buddha as an ox, bear, crow, king, bowman, warrior and sage. Between Rafe's animated telling and our openness from the zazen, it was not hard to be totally taken in. An ox wanting to enrich his human benefactor – of course! A hunter double-crossing a bear – curses! A hundred foot tall Sticky Haired Monster – yikes! And a sage, the Buddha many lifetimes earlier, making a serious moral error – the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas really *were* once like us! And let's not forget the crow that embodied cleverness, courage, compassion and remained completely a crow. Caw!

Much of the discussion following the telling of the stories concerned animals. Why do the people in these stories accept that animals speak to them as a matter of course? And why don't we? The animals in the stories have the same character strengths and foibles as people. And this is true today as well. What have we lost individually and as a culture, by our estrangement from animals? What else have we lost? The great sage gave his life to feed a starving tigress and prevent it from eating her cubs. "Where are the starving tigers in your life?" Rafe asked.

We talked about how the Paramitas, the great perfections, are demonstrated through the characters. The Blue Bear has the courage to stand up for himself, but in a way that advances the understanding of those that wronged him. The Little Sage integrates wisdom and compassionate action. The benevolence of the Great Joy, the Ox has

boundaries. The warrior Prince Five-Weapons' determined energy by itself strikes fear in a huge monster. And the smart crow, foolish crow and Wise Crow each in their own way react to challenges.

For me, the ringing gift from this experience is to understand better the value of my own life. Rafe says that these tales are playing out today. We too are future Buddhas acting in our own Jatakas and facing trials on the Path. This being so, how rich our lives are! How important each act!

Rafe expressed deep gratitude for the opportunity to work with us. Our response is, don't be silly, we are the recipients of your talent and wisdom. But Rafe did not just politely gassho; he maintained his position of gratitude. Another Teaching. At the intersection of true giving and true receiving, who is the giver and who is the receiver?