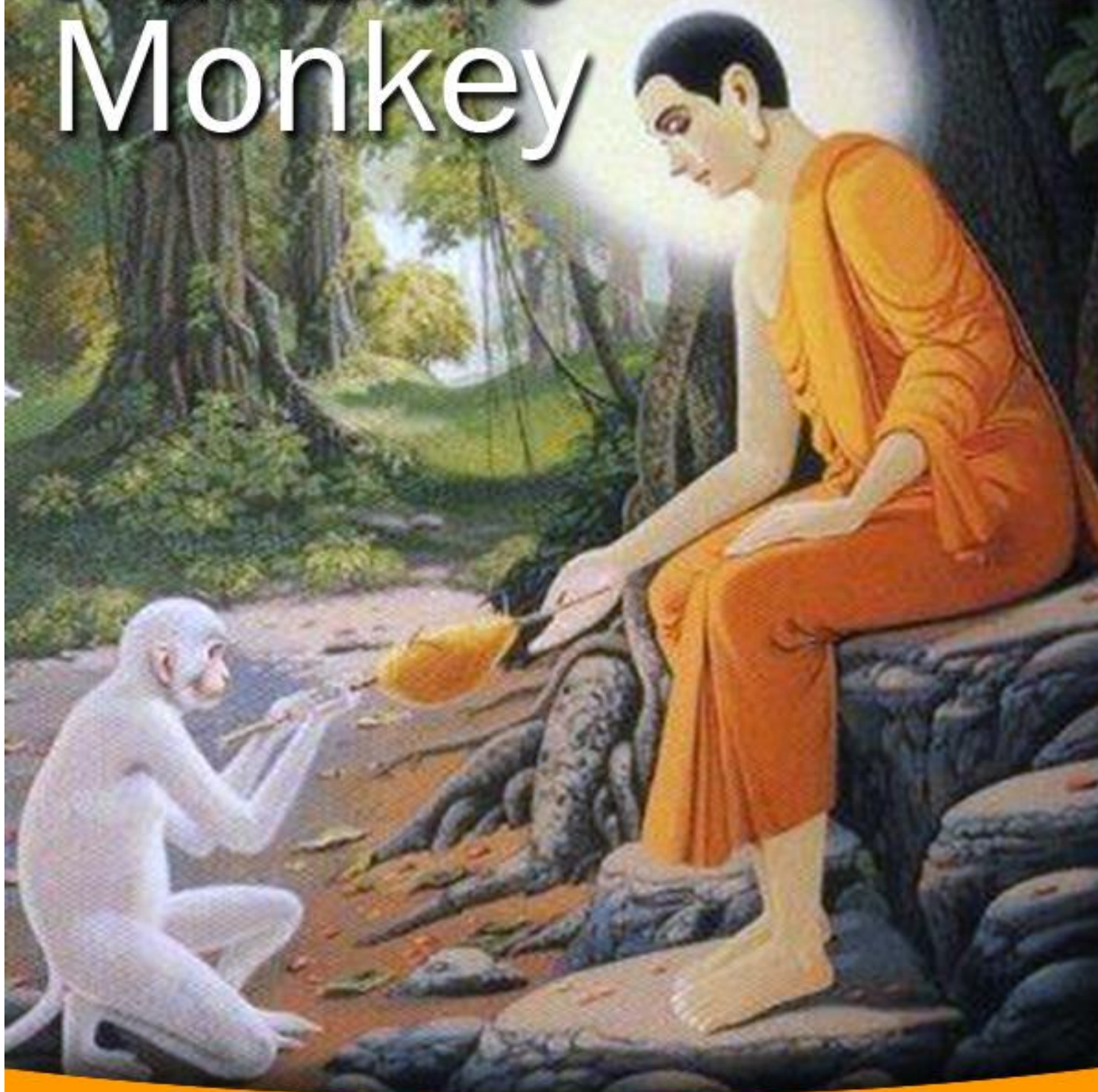


Buddha and the Monkey



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Essays on Buddhist History & Culture

The Buddha and the Monkey



A little to the south-east of the entrance of the Mahabodhi Temple at Bodh Gaya are three stupas made out of carved stones held together by iron clamps. The form of these stupas and the decorations on them indicate that they are of Pala workmanship and probably date from between the 9th and 12th centuries CE. On each side of the base of the stupas are small niches each depicting one of the four main events in the life of the Buddha - his birth, enlightenment, first preaching and his final Nirvana. On the drum of each stupa are larger elaborately decorated niches containing



images of the Buddha either meditating or preaching. However, the niche on both the east and the north side of the last of these stupas immediately catch the eye of the observer as being different from the others. The east niche is difficult to see because of the retaining wall near it so we will only discuss the north niche. Within this niche is an image of

the Buddha in high relief sitting crossed-legged on a lotus throne. He

wears a crown, nestles a bowl in his lap and is flanked on either side by figures of two monks, his chief disciples Sariputta and Moggallana. Above him are the spreading leaves of a tree and on the right is a god floating on a cloud and holding a sword. So far all this is quite conventional. However, opposite this god on the left is not another god as is usually the case, but a tree with a figure in it, apparently picking fruit or perhaps plucking flowers. On the pedestal below the Buddha rather than two lions or two deer flanking a Dhamma wheel as is usually the case, there are three unusual-looking figures. The figure on the left was slightly damaged sometime after 1999 but



before then it depicted the figure lifting something up towards the Buddha. The central figure seems to be dancing and what is depicted on the right is not immediately clear. It seems to be a column made of rings stacked on each other with something projecting from the top and leaning over to the right. Closer inspection of these three figures and the one in the tree reveal that they all have tails and thus are probably meant to be monkeys. As it happens, in the north-east corner of the sacred precincts around the Mahabodhi Temple there is a collection of sculptured

fragments cemented together and now covered with golden paint. One of these fragments was clearly originally part of a pedestal of a statue and it has three figures on it very similar to the one now under discussion. The



faces on these figures and their tails confirm that they are meant to be monkeys. What is the story or incident being depicted on the stupa?

In the Pali Tipitaka, the oldest record of the Buddha's teachings, there is no mention of any encounter between the Buddha and a monkey or monkeys. There is however, a story about the Buddha and an elephant. According to the Udana, a group of monks at Kosambi became embroiled in an unseemly quarrel. The Buddha tried to arbitrate but was told by both parties to mind his own business. In disgust and to show his disapproval of the monk's behavior, the Buddha left the city and went to the Parileyya Forest. The sutta continues,

“Now a certain bull-elephant was living worried by the other elephants; cows, calves and suckling. He had to eat the grass already grazed by them and the branches stripped by them, drink the water muddied by them and when he crossed the river the

others pushed against him. Thus he was constantly disturbed and uncomfortable. Then this bull-elephant thought to himself, 'Here I live constantly disturbed and uncomfortable. Why don't I live alone and away from the crowd?' So this bull-elephant left the herd and went to the Parileyya Forest, near to the foot of a beautiful sal tree where the Exalted One was. And while there he kept down the grass where the Lord was and brought water in his trunk for the Lord."¹

The *Dhammapada Atthakatha*, a work of uncertain but late date, retells this story but adds another character to it, a monkey.

"Now a monkey saw the elephant busy looking after the Tathagata and he thought to himself, 'I will do something also.' One day as he was going about he saw a branch with honey without bees on it. He broke the branch off, took the honey comb together with the branch, plucked a banana leaf, placed the honey on the leaf and offered it to the Teacher who accepted it. The monkey watched to see whether or not he would eat it. But after accepting the honey the Teacher sat down without eating the honey. 'What is the matter?' thought the monkey. So he took the end of the branch, turned it over, looked carefully and noticed some bees' eggs. Having gently removed these he again offered the honey to the Teacher who now eat it. The monkey was so delighted that he leapt from one branch to the next another and jumped for joy. But the branches he grasped and the ones he stood on broke and he fell down, was impaled on a stump

¹ Steinthal, P., ed. *Udāna*, PTS, London 1885, p.41-2

and perished. But because of his faith in the Teacher he was reborn in the Tavatinsa Heaven in a golden mansion thirty *yojanas* in extent and with a retinue of a thousand heavenly nymphs.”²

There is some correspondence between this story and our sculpture - a monkey getting honey from a tree, offering it to the Buddha and dancing for joy, although no elephant is depicted and the stump that impaled the monkey looks nothing like the column of rings depicted on the pedestal. What could this column of rings with the monkey seemingly stuck in or falling into it be?

The Chinese Tipitaka includes a translation of the Sanskrit version of the Pali *Acchariyabbhutadhamma Sutta*, The Discourse of the Wonderful and Marvelous Things. One of these “wonderful and marvelous things” not mentioned in the Pali version is that a monkey once offered a bowl of honey to the Buddha. The passage in question reads,

“Once, the Buddha was in the forest of Vaisali. The monks arranged the bowls on the floor, including the Buddha’s. A monkey came and took the Buddha’s bowl. The monks shouted, ‘The monkey will break the Buddha’s bowl.’ The Buddha said, ‘Do not shout at the monkey. It won’t break the bowl.’ The monkey carried the bowl to a sal tree and climbed up it. Filling the bowl with honey it went back to where the Buddha was residing and offered it to him. The Buddha refused to take it. The monkey went aside and removed all

² Norman, H. C., ed. *Dhammapada Atthakatha* 1906, Vol. I, pp. 60-63.

the worms. Then it offered to the Buddha again but the Buddha refused again. So the monkey went aside and mixed some water into the honey and offered it to the Buddha. Finally, the Buddha accepted it. When the monkey saw the Buddha took honey from the bowl, it danced in joy and left dancing in circles. That the Buddha was able to make the monkey dance in joy for offering a bowl of honey is indeed a quality of the Buddha never seen before.”³

When the Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang was in India in the 7th century he visited Vesali and recorded this about some monuments he saw in the city.

“To the south of the stone pillar is a tank that was dug by a group of monkeys for the Buddha, as he once lived at this place in the old days. Not far to the west of the tank is a *stupa* at the place where the monkeys took the Tathagata’s alms bowl and climbed up a tree to gather honey. Not far to the south of the tank is a *stupa* at the place where the monkeys offered the honey to the Buddha. At the northwest corner of the tank, some figures of monkeys are still preserved.”⁴

In this version of the story it is not one but a group of monkeys who offer honey to the Buddha. Xuanzang’s version of the story says nothing about the subsequent fate of the monkeys and nothing that could help explain the column of rings.

³ Taisho 1 471a16 to 471a28

⁴ Li Rongxi, trans. *The Great Tang Dynasty Record of the Western Regions*, Berkeley, 1996, pp. 210.

However, the biography of the Tibetan pilgrim Dharmasvamin who traveled through northern India in the 13th century may help answer this question. When he was in Bodh Gaya in circa 1234 Dharmasvamin heard about a monument some distance from Bodh Gaya.

“At another place near the same location, there was a stone image representing the Blessed One holding the alms bowl and a monkey; this image commemorates the presentation of honey to the Bodhisattva by a monkey. The image is found inside a temple, the door of which faces east. Dharmasvamin also said that in front of that door there was a dried up well surrounded by a brick wall”.⁵

The most widespread version of the monkey story today, told to all pilgrims visiting Vesali, is that after the monkey made his offering he fell

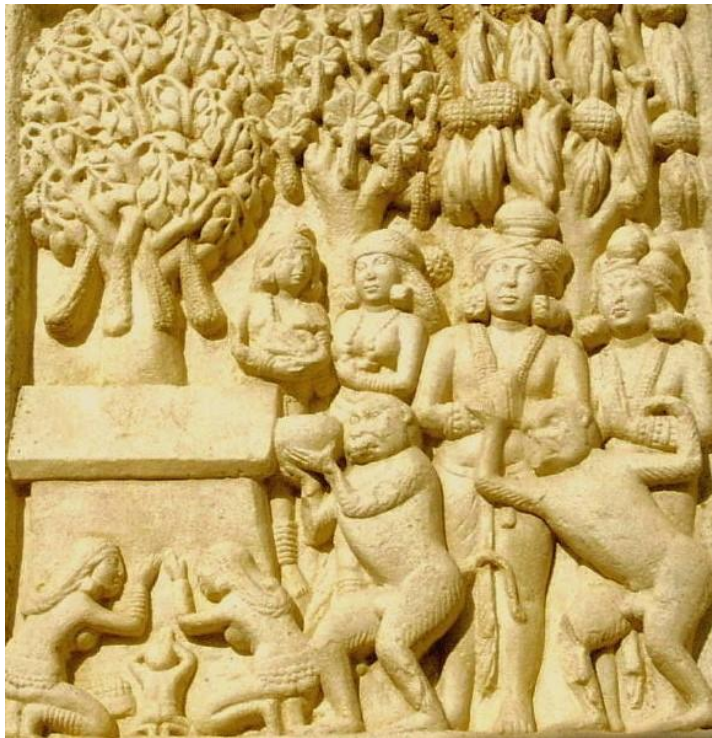


down a well and died. This story is mentioned in nearly all guide books which include Vesali. Dharmasvamin’s brief account of the incident mentions a well but without specifically linking it to the monkey. However, the mention of this well right next to the place where the monkey offered honey to the Buddha leaves us in little doubt that they are related. But if the column of rings on

⁵ Roerich, George, Biography of Dharmasvamin, Patna, 1959, pp. 81-2.

the pedestal is indeed a well, why is it depicted in this unusual way? Archaeological investigations have shown that one of the most common types of wells in ancient India were what are now called ring wells. Rather than being lined with brick or stone, the sides of these wells were prevented from collapsing by large baked clay rings, one fitting into the other. It would seem that the image on the right side of the Buddha's pedestal is meant to suggest a ring well with the monkey falling into it.

While the four versions of the monkey story all agree in their broad outline they all differ in detail. The Pali version is set near Kosambi, the



Sanskrit and Xuanzang's versions take place in Vesali, and Dharmasvamin's in the vicinity of Bodh Gaya. Both the Pali and Sanskrit accounts have the monkey removing worms, i.e. bee larvae or eggs, from the honey. The Pali, Sanskrit and Dhammasvamin's

versions have one monkey, while Xuanzang's has a troop of them. The Pali version has the monkey impaled on a branch, the other three do not mention his fate, and the sculpture on the Bodh Gaya stupa depicts him falling into a well. The story of the monkey's offering must have been a popular one in the Buddhist world. The earliest depiction of it is to be

found in a panel on the exterior of the north gateway of the great stupa at Sanchi dating from circa 150/100 BCE. This panel depicts the monkey about to offer a bowl to a tree, representing the Buddha, and then him dancing. There are several depictions of the story in the art of Gandhara. As with the Sanchi depiction, all of them show the monkey making his offering and dancing, but none of them show him either impaled on a stick or falling down a well. One of the latest depictions of the story in Indian art is in an illuminated manuscript now in the National Museum in New Delhi dating from the 12th century. During a recent trip to Tsaparang in western Tibet I saw two separate depictions of the story on the walls of the Lhakhang Karpo (The White Chapel). These paintings date from about the 15th century although their style is strongly influenced by much earlier Newari and Indian art.

Despite the obvious popularity of the monkey story in any of its forms the only mentions of it in Buddhist literature are from the Sanskrit version of the *Accharabbhutadhamma Sutta* now preserved in the Chinese Tipitaka, and the Pali *Dhammapada Atthakatha*. It would seem therefore that popular oral versions of the story circulated more widely and were more well-known than the literary versions. This perhaps explains why there are several different versions of the story.