

Brahmanas and the Crisis of Moral Authority in the *Bhūridatta Jātaka*

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Abstract: This study examines the ethical and social dimensions of Brahmins as portrayed in the *Bhūridatta Jātaka*, a narrative within the Buddhist *Jātaka* collection that recounts the Buddha's past lives to convey moral teachings. Focusing on the crisis of moral authority, the analysis interrogates the representation of Brahmins in the context of ancient India's religious and social hierarchies. While historically revered as custodians of spiritual knowledge and ritual expertise, the *Bhūridatta Jātaka* critiques the moral character and power dynamics of Brahmins, juxtaposing their actions with the virtuous behavior of Bhūridatta a *nāga* (serpent deity embodying the Buddha-to-be).

Through this contrast, the text challenges entrenched notions of caste-based authority and ceremonial privilege, advancing a Buddhist ethical framework that prioritizes moral integrity and selfless conduct over inherited status or ritualistic dominance. This critique underscores the limitations of Brahmanical power and advocates for an inclusive moral order rooted in ethical actions rather than rigid social divisions. By situating the *Bhūridatta Jātaka* within broader discourses on virtue, power, and authority in ancient Indian society, this study highlights its enduring relevance to discussions of ethics, social justice, and the deconstruction of hierarchical norms.

Keywords: Buddhism, Jataka, Brahmanis, Social, Ethical, Power

Introduction

The *Bhūridatta Jātaka* (Jātaka No. 543), part of the *Mahanipāta Jātakas*—the final ten tales in the Buddhist *Jātaka* collection—offers a compelling narrative that underscores the Buddha's perfection of virtues (*pāramitās*) across his previous lives. This intricate tale centers on Bhūridatta, a *nāga* (serpent deity) and Bodhisattva, whose life exemplifies the virtue of renunciation (*nekkhamma*). As a prince in the *nāga* realm, Bhūridatta practiced self-restraint, meditating atop an anthill and adopting a lifestyle of peace and humility. His actions, marked by non-violence and self-discipline, reflected his dedication to the path of enlightenment and his ultimate aspiration for Nirvana.¹

Despite his virtuous nature, Bhūridatta's serenity was shattered when a deceitful Brahmin captured him using a magical spell. The Brahmin exploited Bhūridatta's powers for personal gain, forcing him into public performances to amass wealth. This act of subjugation forms the crux of the *Jātaka*, serving as a sharp critique of Brahminical power and the caste's claim to superiority based on Vedic knowledge and ritual expertise. The story challenges these entrenched hierarchies, contrasting the Brahmin's greed and moral failings with Bhūridatta's ethical fortitude and unwavering compassion.

Even under duress, Bhūridatta exemplified forgiveness, refraining from harm and ultimately pardoning the Brahmin after his rescue by his brothers. This act of grace transformed the Brahmin, prompting him to renounce his avarice and embrace a life of kindness and non-violence. By highlighting the transformative power of virtue and the limitations of inherited authority, the

Bhūridatta Jātaka advances a Buddhist critique of social and ethical hierarchies, emphasizing moral excellence as the cornerstone of a just society.

This paper situates the *Bhūridatta Jātaka* within the broader discourses of virtue, power, and authority in ancient Indian culture. It explores how the narrative critiques Brahminical dominance and reimagines the ethical and social dimensions of authority, offering insights into the Buddhist perspective on moral behavior and social justice.

Contextualizing the *Jātaka*

The *Jātaka*² tales, an integral component of Buddhist literature, narrate the past lives of Gautama Buddha prior to his final birth as Siddhartha Gautama. These stories, which highlight the Buddha's perfection of virtues (*pāramitās*) over countless lifetimes, serve as didactic tools illustrating moral and spiritual ideals. The *Jātakas* have been meticulously documented in seminal works such as the editions by V. Fausbøll (1877–96) and translations by T. W. Rhys Davids (1880) and E. B. Cowell et al. (1895–1907). Collectively, they underscore the Buddha's wisdom and compassion as exemplars for spiritual seekers.

Origins and Development of the *Jātakas*

Early Oral Tradition

The *Jātaka* tales originated within the oral tradition of early Buddhism, transmitted by monks and lay practitioners through recitation and storytelling. These narratives, intended to teach Buddhist principles in an engaging and accessible manner, were formally recorded in written form around the 1st century BCE. Many tales likely predate Buddhism, drawing from Indian folklore, myths, and cultural traditions, into which the Buddha's past lives were integrated to convey Buddhist values. This blending of pre-Buddhist narratives with Buddhist ethics underscores their adaptability and enduring appeal.³

Inclusion in the Pali Canon

The *Jātakas* were eventually incorporated into the Pali Canon as part of the *KhuddakaNikaya*⁴ within the *Sutta*⁵ *Pitaka* (collection of discourse). This inclusion elevated the tales to canonical status, solidifying their role in Buddhist education and devotion. The Pali tradition comprises 547 *Jātaka* stories, forming one of the most extensive collections within Buddhist literature. These narratives depict the Buddha's prior lives, portraying his journey toward enlightenment and his embodiment of virtuous qualities.⁶

Structure of the *Jātaka* Tales

Each *Jātaka* tale follows a tripartite structure that seamlessly connects past and present narratives to convey moral and spiritual lessons. The *Story of the Present* provides the context, often involving a real-life situation or teaching moment during the Buddha's life that prompts the recounting of a past life. This is followed by the *Story of the Past*, which recounts a significant event or virtue that the Buddha exemplified in a previous existence. The narrative concludes with the *Connection*, where the Buddha identifies the rebirth of characters in the past story as individuals in the present, creating a continuum of moral and karmic responsibility. This structure effectively weaves timeless ethical lessons into relatable and engaging tales, ensuring their resonance across audiences and generations.⁷

Themes and Virtues in the *Jātakas*

Central to the *Jātakas* are the ten *pāramitās* (perfections) that the Buddha cultivated across countless lifetimes. These virtues—generosity (*dāna*), morality (*sīla*), renunciation (*nekkhamma*), wisdom (*paññā*), energy (*virīya*), patience (*khanti*), truthfulness (*sacca*), determination (*adhiṭṭhāna*), loving-kindness (*mettā*), and equanimity (*upekkhā*)—form the ethical foundation of the tales. Alongside these, the *Jātakas* emphasize broader moral themes such as compassion, forgiveness, honesty, and non-attachment, offering profound lessons for spiritual growth and ethical conduct. Through relatable characters and vivid storytelling, the *Jātakas* present complex philosophical ideas in a manner accessible to both lay and monastic audiences, showcasing the universality and practical applicability of Buddhist values.⁸

Cultural Spread and Adaptation

As Buddhism expanded across Asia, the *Jātakas* spread to regions including Sri Lanka, Southeast Asia, Central Asia, and East Asia. Translated into languages such as Sanskrit, Sinhalese, Tibetan, and Chinese, these tales became deeply embedded in the cultural and artistic traditions of Buddhist-majority societies. Their influence is evident in temple murals and carvings, such as those at the Ajanta Caves in India and Borobudur in Indonesia, which visually narrate these stories.⁹

Significance of the *Jātakas*

The *Jātakas* hold immense significance within Buddhist traditions as a source of ethical guidance, spiritual inspiration, and cultural heritage. They serve as didactic tools, instilling moral principles and spiritual values in both lay followers and monks. By illustrating the Buddha's journey toward enlightenment, these tales inspire individuals to strive for self-improvement through the cultivation of virtues. Beyond their religious function, the *Jātakas* have profoundly influenced literature, theater, and folklore across Asia, reflecting the integration of Buddhist teachings into the cultural fabric of diverse societies. Their adaptability and universal themes ensure their continued relevance, making them timeless narratives of moral and spiritual growth. Representations of some of them are found in the reliefs on the Bharhut *stupa*, showing that they had already become popular by the second century B.C.¹⁰

Significance of *Bhūridatta's Tale*

The *Bhūridatta Jātaka* offers profound lessons in renunciation, patience, and self-control, emphasizing the Buddhist ideals of non-attachment and the transformative power of enduring challenges with grace and forgiveness. At its core, the tale underscores the karmic consequences of greed and unethical behavior, illustrating the moral repercussions of such actions. As a narrative, it exemplifies the qualities of compassion, wisdom, and humility that the Buddha cultivated in his journey toward enlightenment.

This *Jātaka* story not only serves as a moral guide but also demonstrates the power of forgiveness and the value of selflessness in achieving inner peace. *Bhūridatta's* resilience and magnanimity, even in the face of exploitation and suffering, highlight the importance of maintaining equanimity and compassion amidst adversity. The narrative reinforces the idea that true enlightenment is attained through humility, understanding, and a commitment to higher virtues.

Furthermore, the tale emphasizes the role of wisdom and strategic thinking in overcoming obstacles and achieving fulfillment. Bhūridatta's story serves as a reminder that intelligence and thoughtful decision-making are crucial in navigating life's challenges. The ability to face adversities with courage and insight transforms obstacles into opportunities for personal growth and self-discovery. Ultimately, the *Bhūridatta Jātaka* teaches that true happiness and a sense of accomplishment emerge from perseverance, ethical conduct, and an unwavering commitment to virtuous living.

Broader Context

The *Bhūridatta Jātaka*, like many other *Jātaka* tales, provides a narrative lens through which Buddhist teachings critique Brahmanical orthodoxy. The tale challenges ritualism, caste-based hierarchies, and materialistic values, presenting virtues such as renunciation, non-violence, and compassion as the true paths to spiritual liberation. Central to the story is a reflection on the ethical and social dimensions of power, authority, and virtue, emphasizing the supremacy of moral conduct over social status or birthright. By juxtaposing the selflessness and ethical integrity of the *nāga* prince Bhūridatta with the greed and exploitation of the Brahmin antagonist, the narrative critiques the socio-religious norms of its time while advocating for universal moral principles.

A central theme of the *Bhūridatta Jātaka* is the virtue of renunciation (*nekkhamma*). Bhūridatta willingly relinquishes the comforts of his luxurious life in the *nāga* realm to live on earth, dedicating himself to restraint and meditation. This act of renunciation embodies the Buddhist ideal of detaching from material desires to pursue higher spiritual goals, illustrating that true happiness arises from inner cultivation rather than external pleasures. Alongside renunciation, the tale highlights the virtues of patience and forbearance (*khanti*). Despite his immense power, Bhūridatta endures mistreatment and captivity by a greedy Brahmin with remarkable composure, refusing to retaliate. His restraint underscores the superiority of non-violence and endurance over anger and vengeance, even in the face of grave injustice.

Compassion and forgiveness (*karunā*) are also pivotal to the narrative. Despite being exploited, Bhūridatta has no ill will towards the Brahmin, demonstrating boundless compassion and forgiveness. His actions embody the Buddhist principle of breaking the cycle of hatred and retribution, highlighting the transformative power of understanding and non-violence in resolving conflict. Moreover, the *Jātaka* challenges the Brahmanical emphasis on caste-based superiority by portraying Bhūridatta, a *nāga*, as morally and spiritually superior to the Brahmin antagonist. This reversal of traditional hierarchy reinforces the Buddhist belief that virtue and spiritual progress are determined by ethical behavior and character rather than birth or social status.

The consequences of greed are another key moral lesson in the story. The Brahmin's insatiable greed and unethical behavior ultimately lead to his disgrace and downfall. His exploitation of Bhūridatta results in material loss and public humiliation, reflecting the karmic principle that unethical actions bring suffering. This serves as a cautionary tale about the self-destructive nature of greed and the value of ethical conduct for achieving long-term peace and happiness.

In its broader implications, the *Bhūridatta Jātaka* serves as a critique of socio-religious authority and materialism, reflecting the Buddha's ethical teachings. By highlighting virtues such as renunciation, compassion, and moral accountability, it challenges the dominance of caste and

ritualistic practices, asserting that true spiritual authority arises from ethical living. The story transcends its immediate narrative to offer a vision of a society rooted in virtue, equality, and compassion, reiterating the Buddhist ideal that moral integrity and spiritual wisdom are the ultimate markers of authority and worth.

Position of Brahmins in the *Bhūridatta Jātaka*

In the *Bhūridatta Jātaka*, the portrayal of Brahmins serves as both a critical narrative device and a broader commentary within Buddhist discourse on spiritual authority and ethical conduct. The text reflects an effort to redefine spiritual legitimacy, challenging the dominance of Brahmanical traditions in ancient Indian society. Through its depiction of Brahmins, the *Jātaka* critiques the misuse of power, the ethical failings of ritualism, and the social hierarchies upheld by caste.

The story portrays Brahmins as exploiters of power, driven by greed and self-interest. The central Brahmin character captures Bhūridatta, the virtuous *nāga* prince, using magical spells with the intent of exploiting him for profit. This depiction casts Brahmins not as noble spiritual leaders, as celebrated in Brahmanical traditions, but as figures willing to misuse their knowledge for material gain. The narrative undermines the notion of Brahmins as inherently trustworthy and virtuous, instead presenting them as ethically compromised. By doing so, the tale critiques the socio-religious authority claimed by Brahmins, exposing the potential for greed and exploitation behind their status.

Further, the Brahmin's ability to subdue Bhūridatta using rituals and spells highlights the misuse of ritual knowledge for personal gain. This depiction undermines the Brahmanical claim to moral and spiritual superiority based on exclusive access to Vedic rituals. By showcasing the Brahmin's exploitation of spiritual knowledge, the *Jātaka* challenges the idea that such knowledge should confer power and privilege. Instead, it advocates for a more egalitarian view of spiritual wisdom, emphasizing ethical conduct over ritualistic mastery. As Ian Harris notes in *Buddhism, Power and Political Order*, such narratives reflect Buddhism's broader critique of ritualism as a basis for moral authority.¹¹

The story also presents a striking inversion of moral and social hierarchies. Despite his high caste status, the Brahmin is depicted as morally inferior to Bhūridatta, a non-human *nāga*. This inversion directly challenges the Brahmanical worldview, which associates moral and spiritual worth with birth and caste. By portraying Bhūridatta as the ethical exemplar, the tale dismantles the notion of inherent superiority based on caste, asserting that moral virtue is determined by one's actions and character rather than social status.

Finally, the Brahmin's unethical actions culminate in his downfall, aligning with the Buddhist principle of *kamma* (karma). His greed and disregard for ethical principles lead to humiliation and loss, illustrating the natural consequences of unwholesome actions. The narrative underscores that actions rooted in greed, delusion, or harm inevitably result in suffering, either in this life or the next. This principle serves as a call for mindfulness and intentionality, emphasizing the cultivation of virtuous actions as the foundation for a peaceful and harmonious existence.

Through its critique of Brahmins, the *Bhūridatta Jātaka* challenges the social and spiritual structures upheld by Brahmanical orthodoxy. By exposing the ethical failings associated with caste

and ritual-based authority, the story promotes an alternative vision of spiritual legitimacy rooted in compassion, ethical conduct, and the egalitarian principles of Buddhist thought.

In the *Bhūridatta Jātaka*, the role of Brahmins is framed within a broader Buddhist critique of Brahmanical authority, ritualism, and caste-based hierarchies. The story employs the Brahmin character as a narrative foil to challenge notions of spiritual superiority based on birth and ritual knowledge. Through its depictions of exploitation, moral failings, and the misuse of ritual knowledge, the tale redefines the criteria for spiritual authority, emphasizing ethical behavior, compassion, and wisdom as the true markers of spiritual leadership.

Challenging Brahmanical Authority

The *Jātaka* undermines the authority of Brahmins by highlighting their moral and spiritual failings. The greedy Brahmin captures Bhūridatta, the virtuous *nāga* prince, through magical spells, intending to exploit him for wealth and fame. In the *Jataka*, when *Arittha* told the false story about Brahmins and Vedas, Bodhisatta heard it all as he lay in his bed, and the Nāgas told him about it; then the Bodhisatta reflected, "Ariṭṭha is telling a false legend, I will interrupt his discourse, and put true views into the assembly." Then he sent for Ariṭṭha and said to him, "Ariṭṭha, you have spoken falsely when you describe the Brahmins and the Vedas, for the sacrifice of victims by all these ceremonies of the Vedas is not held to be desirable and it does not lead to heaven,—see what unreality there is in your words"; so he repeated these *gāthās* in his words describing the various kinds of sacrifice which is given in the *Jatak*.¹² This portrayal critiques the Brahmanical association of spiritual authority with caste and birthright, presenting the Brahmin as spiritually inferior to Bhūridatta, who embodies Buddhist virtues such as renunciation, patience, and compassion. By contrasting the Brahmin's selfish motives with Bhūridatta's selfless conduct, the narrative conveys the message that true spiritual authority arises from one's actions and inner qualities, rather than social status. This critique reflects historical tensions between early Buddhism and Brahmanism, as Buddhism sought to provide a more egalitarian path to spiritual liberation, accessible to all regardless of background.

Redefining Spiritual Leadership

The story challenges traditional notions of spiritual leadership, presenting Bhūridatta, a *nāga* and non-human being, as a moral exemplar and bodhisattva. His virtues surpass those of the Brahmin, symbolizing the Buddhist ideal that spiritual development is based on ethical conduct, wisdom, and meditation rather than hereditary privilege or ritualistic knowledge. This redefinition of leadership rejects exclusivity and caste-based hierarchies, advocating for a universal model of spiritual attainment grounded in personal effort and inner transformation.

Critique of Ritualism

The Brahmin's reliance on spells and rituals to subdue Bhūridatta highlights the narrative's critique of ritual-centric practices in Brahmanism. These rituals, often tied to caste-based hierarchies, are depicted as tools for manipulation and personal gain rather than genuine spiritual advancement. By showing the Brahmin using rituals for immoral purposes, the story undermines the legitimacy of such practices and questions the claim that ritual knowledge confers spiritual authority. In contrast, the *Jātaka* emphasizes personal spiritual growth, ethical living, and direct

experience as pathways to enlightenment, rejecting dependence on intermediaries or external ceremonies.¹³

Inclusivity versus Exclusivity

The tale embodies the Buddhist ideal of inclusivity, where spiritual progress is attainable to all based on virtue rather than caste or social privilege. By portraying Bhūridatta as morally and spiritually superior to the Brahmin, the narrative critiques the exclusivity of Vedic knowledge and caste hierarchies, which privileged Brahmins as the sole custodians of sacred wisdom. This inclusivity challenges the rigidity and inequality of Brahmanical traditions, highlighting the Buddhist belief in universal accessibility to spiritual growth.¹⁴

Examples of Brahmanical Critique

Exploitation and Greed

The Brahmin's unethical actions, such as capturing Bhūridatta to exploit him for profit, expose the dangers of greed and the misuse of power. This portrayal challenges the moral superiority often attributed to Brahmins, revealing hypocrisy and undermining their credibility as spiritual leaders. The *Jātaka* presents a cautionary tale about blindly trusting authority figures, urging individuals to critically assess the motives of those in power. In contrast, the Buddhist message emphasizes compassion, personal morality, and ethical treatment of all beings as the foundation for true spiritual leadership.

Rejection of Ritualism and Caste Superiority

The Brahmin's reliance on rituals for control and personal gain critiques the Brahmanical association of caste-based hierarchies with spiritual authority. By depicting Bhūridatta, a *nāga*, as morally and spiritually superior, the narrative challenges notions of caste superiority and ritualistic dominance. This inversion of traditional power dynamics promotes the Buddhist ideal of equality, where inner virtues such as compassion, mindfulness, and wisdom are prioritized over external labels or societal status.¹⁵

Buddhist Message

Through its critique of Brahmanical practices, the *Bhūridatta Jātaka* highlights Buddhism's emphasis on ethical conduct, meditation, and inclusivity as the paths to enlightenment.¹⁶ The tale rejects caste and ritual as markers of spiritual attainment, advocating for a vision of spiritual progress that is accessible to all beings. It underscores the egalitarian ideals of Buddhism, where true enlightenment is achieved through personal effort, mindfulness, and moral integrity, rather than external privileges or inherited status.

Conclusion

The *Bhūridatta Jātaka* positions Brahmins as flawed figures, whose greed and misuse of ritual knowledge serve as a stark contrast to the Buddhist virtues of compassion, renunciation, and moral integrity. By critiquing Brahmanical practices and values, the narrative reflects Buddhism's broader challenge to the dominant religious paradigms of its time, particularly the exclusivity of caste and ritual-based hierarchies. The story underscores the moral and spiritual superiority of ethical conduct and personal virtue over inherited status or ritual authority. Through its portrayal of universal values and its rejection of exclusivity, the *Jātaka* promotes a vision of spiritual enlightenment as accessible to all beings, transcending boundaries of caste, species, and social standing. In doing so, it reaffirms the inclusivity and egalitarian ethos central to Buddhist teachings.

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