



Article

Ecosophy through Jātaka tales

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Abstract

Society is filled with different kinds of stories for validating its cultural ideologies and beliefs. These stories (fables, myths, proverbs, legends, etc.) pass on from ages and form schemata for the community members. As the stories have great power in framing the community's conceptual frameworks, they can also change human cognition related to the natural world. This article provides an ecosophy in tune with the Buddhism *sūtras* following *ahimsā* or nonviolence, reincarnation, and value and compassion towards nonhuman animals. Through this paper, the *Jātaka* tales are presented as a beneficial discourse for creating ecological awareness among people. The book *Buddha Stories* by Demi has been given an ecocritical reading and linguistic analysis of the narratives exploring the animals in *Jātaka* stories as manifestations of life deserving respect and empathy. The paper presents *Jātaka* tales as the exploratory study of a new paradigm in analysing the text and to encourage a discourse that overcomes the perception of commodifying nature as human possession and its mere utility to humans. None of the academic research has introduced *Jātaka* stories in the light of the "eco-" disciplines, as constructive discourses for people to live by and utilising them to conceptualise the nonhuman animals as sentient beings. Thus, the aim is forming a beneficial discourse to resist the hegemonic discourses that harm ecology and presenting a positive outlook for future generations to pursue a sustainable livelihood.

Keywords: ecosophy, *Jātaka* tales, nonhuman animals, beneficial discourse, stories, Buddhism

1. Introduction

The twenty-first century has made a mark in the Anthropocene era¹ by propelling the ecological crisis across the world. The human-animal relationship, at this point, is a significant concern. Giving little agency to nonhuman animals, the lives of these beings are compromised. In recent times, their sufferings are neglected — excluding thus animals *qua* animals. Bhattacharjee (2020) reports some recent atrocities towards nonhuman animals, where a pregnant elephant has been killed “with a pineapple stuffed with explosives and the killing of a pregnant cow in a similar way”, reflecting the human mentality which oppresses “human minorities and nonhuman animals” (Berry, 1997, p. 115). These activities bolster inequalities and injustice — resulting in unsustainability. The cruelty to other-than-human animals is legitimised in the ideologies of mainstream discourse as “God-given, natural, [and] benign” (van Dijk, 1997, p. 25). So, it is the need of the hour to revisit the popular discourses that influence the cognition of the community members for the natural environment around them. In line with the animal rights activists, the power of language is an essential tool in shaping human beings’ perception of animals. According to Stibbe (2007), one can also “look for alternative discourses ... which express a particular intimacy with, and embeddedness in, the natural world” (p. 102). Furthermore, Stibbe (2007) stresses that “it is important to discover [alternative] discourses which overcome the assumption that other animals and plants are objects, human possessions, individually inconsequential tokens of species, or that their value lies only in their rarity or short-term utility to humans” (p. 102). This article presents how the discourses of *Jātaka* stories can inculcate environmental awareness among children.

2. The overview of *Jātaka* tales and Buddhism *sūtras*

The *Jātaka* stories, a collection of didactic stories, “have for centuries provided a vehicle for the entertainment of Buddhist peoples in many lands” (Pierce, 1969, p. 245). The teachings of the Buddha are also delivered through the *Jātaka* commentary. The teachings revolve around “the Four Noble Truths, as articulated in the Nikaya *sūtras*” (Finnigan, 2017, p. 2). The first truth is one should suffer in his/her life. The second truth recognises the reasons behind the suffering. The third asserts that suffering ends. Lastly, the fourth truth talks about the Eightfold Path towards *nirvāna*. The Eightfold Path

[has been] divided into three bundles: wisdom (*prajñā*), which consists of coming to a right understanding of the nature of reality and adopting the right intention, attitude, or orientation towards it; ethical conduct (*śīla*), which consists of right speech, right action, and right livelihood; and meditation (*samādhi*), which consists of right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. (Finnigan, 2017, p. 2)

¹ It is an era describing the recent period of the Earth’s geologic time scale in which human activities have started to negatively and significantly affect the planet’s ecosystem and climate.

In the nature of ethical conduct, Buddha mentions *abimsā*, the philosophy of nonviolence — not to kill or harm any living being.

However, many works on *Jātaka* tales have been made emphasising its importance “to inculcate obvious lower truths” (Hopkins, 1924, as cited in Pierce, 1969, p. 245), “to provide a rewarding amount of material reflecting the social and economic life of early India” (Mehta, as cited in Pierce, 1969, p. 246). Although Finnigan (2017) has not addressed the *Jātaka* tales, he has insightfully examined and analysed the various Buddha manuscripts. He also raised the question whether a Buddhist should be vegetarian, following the *abimsā* principle. None of the academic research, however, has introduced *Jātaka* stories in the light of the “eco-” disciplines, as beneficial discourses for people to live by and utilising them to conceptualise nonhuman animals as sentient beings.

3. Methodology

The present study selects Demi’s book, *Buddha Stories*, where eleven stories have been presented to children, particularly as bedtime stories. Demi, or Charlotte Dumaesq Hunt, is a well-known figure in writing and compiling stories for children. All the stories in this book (*Buddha Stories*) present the teachings of Lord Buddha with the principles of *abimsā*, reincarnation², value and compassion towards all the living beings of the ecosystems. In the preface, Demi (1997) mentions that she has collected the stories mainly from London Pali Text Society, 1895, where “the most basic source in English is the Jataka translated from Pali by various hands” (p. 6).

The stories are given ecocritical reading, and the analysis of the text is done by observing the linguistic devices that the stories use to frame social messages. The stories are also explored from an ecological perspective to understand if they are beneficial or destructive to nature. The ecosophy³ of deep ecology is drawn to recognise the intrinsic value of nature and the ecosophy of social ecology talks of resisting the domination of nature and not treating it as a resource. Furthermore, the ecosophy of *Living!* as explained by Stibbe (2015) is worth mentioning. It emphasises the wellbeing of all the living beings, which “is not limited to the present, so includes the ability to live with high wellbeing in the present, in the future, and the ability of future generations to live and live well” (p. 14). The ecosophy also encourages the inculcation of care and empathy for others. In this process, the consumption should be kept within environmental limits, giving social justice to all the citizens of the earth with high wellbeing. “It is therefore necessary to adapt to environmental change, increase resilience to further changes, and find new forms of society as current forms unravel” (p. 15).

McKee (2003) points out that, “[t]extual analysis is a way for researchers to gather information about how other human beings make sense of the world” (p. 1). Critical

² It is the concept of rebirth. Lord Buddha believes that person gains knowledge through rebirth and rebirth is connected to Karma.

³ For Naess (1996), ecosophy means “a philosophy of ecological harmony” (p. 8).

discourse analysis is also made to observe the power play in discursive practices and challenge them. Chilton and Schäffner (1997) believe that critical discourse analysis is the best methodology to explain how the examination of language can lead to exposing “the strategic political functions of coercion, resistance, opposition, protest, dissimulation, legitimisation and delegitimisation [of inequality]” (p. 226).

4. Analysis of the text (*Buddha Stories*)

The book opens up with the story “The Lion King” where the environment of the jungle has been narrated, and the lion is presented as monitoring the kingdom and delivering good advice to all. The animal lion has been given the adjective “great” for his majesty and wisdom. In an article by Krishnan (2018), he argues that the lion is “not contested and elected as a king in the forest rather with its characters and behaviour; we only call it as king of all the animals”. Furthermore, Mike E. (2020) claims, “lions also maintain order. A king maintains order by making laws and punishing those that don’t abide”. Besides that, the lion in the story cares for his folks. He says, “if I do not do something they will run into the river and drown!” (Demi, 1997, p. 8). This characteristic of the lion shows that in the animal world, one animal cares for the other. Rosch (1975), in her work on prototype demonstrates lions and tigers as prototypical members for “predators”. The cultural constructs primarily manifest the negative images of carnivores as predators and evil. Bras-Chopard (2003) discusses that terms like “wild” and “dangerous” for some animals are at the point of contestation. She states that animals are “characterised as dangerous because they respond only to nature and not to human domination” (as cited in Benavides, 2013, p. 66). This story, with its positive frames, will bring to mind a respectful view of the animal kingdom.

After this story, the story of “The Turtle and the Geese” is discussed. In this story, humans are projected as intruders. They always have a habit of making fun of the animal world at the cost of animals’ lives. As narrated in the extract:

Children below saw the two geese flying with the turtle and cried out. “Look at the turtle up in the air! Did you ever see anything so silly in your whole life?” And the children broke into peals of laughter. The turtle’s pride was deeply wounded, and he opened his mouth to say, “If I am carried on a stick, what business is it yours?” But when he let go of the stick, he fell to his death. (Demi, 1997, p. 10)

“The killing of animals is the most extreme and significant expression of human power over them” (Jepson, 2008, p. 127). In general, the wellbeing of animals is rarely considered by humans. The children of the story encroach on animals’ natural habitats and term them “silly”. The adjective “silly” suggests that humans consider the natural habitats of animals as mundane and shallow.

The story “The Black Bull” depicts the relationship between a human being and a bull.

When the master was kind, the bull was happy and was eager to show his gratitude towards him. But one day, when the caretaker was cruel and whipped the bull's sides, the bull felt humiliated. Such an attitude towards the bull is further described through the adverbial phrases, address terms, and verbs (shown in bold) in the following extract:

As the race began, he **jumped** on Beauty's back and **fiercely whipped** his sides. Then he **shouted**, "Pull, **you demon!** Pull!" But Beauty had never heard such words or felt his master's whip before. (Demi, 1997, p. 12)

Beauty complained, "[W]hy were you so **cruel to me?**" He also added, "Master, in all **my** life, have **I** ever hurt you or your children?" (Demi, 1997, p. 12)

The bull has been given agency in the narrative to voice his pain or suffering. After making the caretaker man realise his faults, the bull suggested the caregiver to treat him kindly and to have a contest for a thousand gold pieces. The moral of the story highlights that animals want kindness from human beings. Along the same line of the Buddha *sūtras*, *ahimsā* or nonviolence is one of the practices to attain *nirvāna*⁴. Buddha's perception of *ahimsā* "include[s] animals within the scope of moral concern" (Finnigan, 2017, p. 2).

The story "The Beautiful Parrots" teaches the lesson of optimism — that one should try to search positivity from any incident of life and keep a big heart in accepting all the turns of life. Next, the story "The Cunning Wolf" highlights the principle of reincarnation. "[T]he goat vanished and Buddha appeared in its place" (Demi, 1997, p. 16) — the Lord Buddha was in the form of a goat in the story. So, the concept of reincarnation triggers people the idea of value and respect for all the manifestations of life. Consolidating it with the philosophy of deep ecology, the intrinsic value of all the life forms can also be acknowledged.

In the story "The Little Gray Donkey", the importance and worth of all animals in the ecology is described. A donkey was wearing a lion's skin to terrify others, but at last, got caught. This activity diminishes its worth and value. Connecting it with the philosophy of deep ecology, one should try to recognise the inherent worth of all the living beings in the ecosystems. Besides, the story also points out how human beings manipulate nature for their greed as seen through the verbs and verbal phrases (shown in bold) in the extract below:

Once upon a time, there was a merchant who **carried his goods on the back of a donkey**. At the end of each day he would **look for some rich fields of barley and rice**. Then, when no one was looking, he could **throw a lion's skin** over the donkey, turn him loose, and let him eat to his heart's content. When farmers saw

⁴ According to Buddhism, the ultimate spiritual goal of a person is to achieve *nirvāna*, a place of perfect happiness and peace, where a person liberates from the cycles of birth.

this of this creature in the twilight, they thought he was a lion and didn't dare to come near him! The merchant became cocky. He thought, I **sell** to the people by day and I **rob** them by night. (Demi, 1997, p. 18)

The merchant oppresses and exploits nature (lion's skin and the donkey) for his greed. The mainstream discourse always disregards the suffering of animals. Fairclough (1992) points out how dominant groups reproduce and legitimise the oppression towards the subjugated groups ideologically, rather than through coercion.

In the next story, "The Clever Crab", the moral "[i]f you cheat on the earth, the earth will cheat on you" (Demi, 1997, p. 20) resonates with the power of *Karma*⁵ and also establishes the fact of showing compassion and empathy towards all beings. Similarly, in the story "The Monkey King", the animal monkey made the human king realise how he should behave compassionately towards his fellow citizens; this is because "[i]f the family lives in harmony, all affairs will prosper" (Demi, 1997, p. 22). The story also foregrounds how the human population cares for material wealth, ignoring the wealth of wellbeing of all the creatures of the earth. On the other hand, the monkey king presents how animals also experience care, love, and intelligence. Stibbe (2012a) mentions that to make a humane and sustainable society, human beings need "to look once again at animals and celebrate some of the characteristics that we share" (p. 3). The narrative has rightly presented the destructive instinct of humans that calls on unnecessary material consumption. Such an attitude is indicated through the adverbs, verbs, and verbal phrases (shown in bold) in the following lines:

After tasting it, he had to have **more**, and he **set out** with his men to **find** the source upstream. (Demi, 1997, p. 22)

He called to his men, "**Save the fruit! Save the fruit!**" His men **surrounded the tree** and **aimed their arrows at the monkeys.**" (Demi, 1997, p. 22).

The adverb "more" signals the uncontrollable human greed, and to satisfy their greed, humans set out to find the source. The human king was only worried about his need ("Save the fruit! Save the fruit!"), which exemplifies the selfish side of human population that devalues nature ("surrounded the tree and aimed their arrows at the monkeys"). However, at the end of the story, the human king learns a lesson from the monkey king. This depicts a positive frame in the mind of readers, presenting a harmonious world with a symbiotic relationship amongst all the components of nature — an inclusive space.

Following the ecosophies of social ecology, deep ecology and *Living!* (Stibbe, 2015), the stories of the book *Buddha Stories* deliver the code of conduct that a person can follow to live in harmony with nature. Thereupon, the wellbeing of all the life forms in the

⁵ In Buddhism, Karma indicates that one's present actions are connected with the person's future happenings.

ecosystems can be established. The story “The Golden Goose” has strikingly presented the current reality where humans consider nonhuman animals as property and resources. Human animals try to neglect the sufferings of nonhuman animals and focus largely on profits or benefits. Marking the linguistic features like adjectives and verbs, the exploitation towards the goose can be identified in the following lines:

[T]he woman was very **greedy**. The next time the goose returned, she **grabbed** him with both hands and **pulled out** all his feathers. (Demi, 1997, p. 24)

The agency for the heinous actions on the goose is foregrounded in the above lines. “The woman” is the actor who engages in torturing “the goose” for her greed. This action is foregrounded to criticise the activity and instead encourage the practice of compassionate behaviour towards living beings. Her action is in contrast with the humane gestures of her daughters.

They **gently lifted up** the poor plucked goose and went into the woods. There they **cared** for him until his feathers grew back, shiny and gold. (Demi, 1997, p. 24)

This action of kindness is rewarded at the end, highlighting the importance of kindness. The story delivers a moral, which says “[t]he greatest wealth is the wealth of kindness” (Demi, 1997, p. 24). The story will act as a positive frame in the readers’ minds by making them aware not to view animals as resources but to value them. Animal rights activist, Singer (1990) rightly says “[i]f a being suffers there can be no moral justification for refusing to take that suffering into consideration” (p. 8). The last two stories — “The Magic Pig” and “The Magic Elephant” — depict how the supreme power, God, listens to the prayers of other-than-human animals; thus, suggesting the importance and wellbeing of all the living beings and a biocentric view. “Biocentrism holds that all living things are morally considerable” (Attfield, 2013, p. 526).

5. Discussion

In recent times, people are moving away from nature. Humans have so pervasively reshaped global ecological structures that their consequences will be noticeable in the geological strata to future generations. According to McGregor, the “global environmental crisis is arguably a result of the predominantly Western industrialised nations’ distorted conception of nature and humans’ relationship with the natural world” (McGregor, 2018, p. 109). In the same vein, Stibbe (2012b) mentions that “[i]t is not only that language and ecological destruction are linked, but that globalisation of various kinds plays a central role in linking the two” (p. 2). In many discursive practices (ecotourism, animal farming, fishing, etc.), nature is treated as a resource for human benefits. Fairclough (1992) locates that the ideologies behind this treatment are reproduced by the dominant class of human beings

who follow the “false consciousness” of nonhuman animals. Out of so many false assumptions, “ecolinguistics consists of questioning the stories that underpin our current unsustainable civilisation” (Stibbe, 2014, p. 117). This is because “the stories-we-live-by are [humans’] cognitive structures which influence how multiple people think, talk and act” (Stibbe, 2015, p. 10). Cultural narratives or stories have “an impact on people’s lives and how they treat the ecosystems that support life” (Stibbe, 2015, p. 10). Thus, ecolinguistics also looks for alternative discourses of sustainable livelihood. Stibbe (2012a) has presented analysis “on a range of discourses from Japanese haiku and animated films to the lyrical science writing of Rachel Carson, as examples of positive discourses which encourage respect for nature and the fulfilling of human need in ways which do not rely on excess consumption” (as cited in Stibbe, 2014, p. 124). Accordingly, this paper has presented *Jātaka* stories as beneficial discourses that can help people reconnect with the more-than-human world. One can raise environmental awareness with the help of the stories of the book *Buddha Stories*. The target readers and audiences of the book are children, who are the building blocks of the society. Through reading or telling stories, one can transmit indirect lessons and values to the children. Lucarevschi (2016) mentions that in many studies, it has been observed that the practice of storytelling is effective. “[I]t is fun, engaging and highly memorable, raising learners’ interest in listening to stories, as well as in speaking, writing and reading about them” (p. 23). Moreover, he continues that storytelling has a great impact on encouraging “them to actively participate in oral and written activities related to the story they heard” (p. 24). It is a good pedagogical tool for teaching values. Willis (2017) opines that “the familiarity of the narrative pattern becomes a strong memory-holding template”. Therefore, this tool can be used in the positive light of sustainability for a better future ahead.

6. Introducing *Jātaka* stories in the ecological frames

Human beings think with the help of “unconscious structures called ‘frames’ (sometimes ‘schemas’). Frames include semantic roles, relations between roles, and relations to other frames” (Lakoff, 2010, p. 71). To talk about a school frame, people generally take the roles of teacher, students, lecture, department, etc. Lakoff (2010) also emphasises that as human beings take the help of “frames” to think and talk, one needs to choose the “frames” correctly to form a harmonious relationship with nature. Stibbe (2015) mentions that stories act like cognitive models and can assist in framing the conception of reality. They give reasons to humans whether or not one should be in line with a particular ideology. Consequently, there is a need to “change the stories that individuals or nations live by” and, by doing so, “you change the individuals and nations themselves” (Okri, as cited in Stibbe, 2015, p. 10). Several new stories are explored to thrive for an inclusive and sustainable environment. *Buddha Stories* by Demi introduces readers with characters signifying the harmonious ethical code of conduct to move towards a more-than-human world (see Table 1). It encourages readers and listeners to have an ecological consciousness

by the wellbeing of all living beings of the ecosystems. As Lakoff (2010) mentions, there is a need “to activate the progressive frames on the environment ... and inhibit the conservative frames” (p. 76). And language is the best device in framing the truth. Adding to this, Lakoff (2010) also points out that in recent times, humans are undergoing “environmental hypocognition”. Therefore, “right language is absolutely necessary for communicating ‘the real crisis’” (p. 74). The stories frame a livelihood that cares for all the species, treats nature with respect, values everything of nature, including human beings, controls greed and considers nonhuman animals as sentient beings. The repetitive act of recitation and storytelling will strengthen the circuits of ecological ideologies unconsciously in a hearer’s brain.

Table 1: Overview of the frames in the stories

Trigger words/phrases	Frames
<p><i>Story 1: “The Lion King”</i> Lion King: If I do not do something they will run into the river and drown. Rabbit: O Great Lion!</p>	<p>Animals have feelings — they are sentient beings. The adjective “great” challenges the predatory characteristic of lion — presenting a natural behaviour.</p>
<p><i>Story 2: “The Turtle and the Geese”</i> Children: Look at the turtle up in the air! Did you ever see anything so silly in your whole life? The turtle’s pride was deeply wounded.</p>	<p>Humans are responsible for the sufferings of animals. Humans consider lives of animals as silly — insignificant. Human beings’ destructive action wounds turtle and at last he dies.</p>
<p><i>Story 3: “The Black Bull”</i> Beauty: Then why were you so cruel to me? Did the thought of money make you forget all respect for your friends?</p>	<p>Bull is given the agency to express his sufferings. He also suggests to treat him as a friend and to show him respect.</p>
<p><i>Story 4: “The Beautiful Parrots”</i> Moral: Riches and fame come and go like the wind. (simile)</p>	<p>Reality of the world is understood with the help of nature. Nature is significant. With the simile, the culturally constructed notion of fame and money is challenged and is positioned in line with nature.</p>
<p><i>Story 5: “The Cunning Wolf”</i> Then the goat vanished and Buddha appeared in its place. (antonyms)</p>	<p>God is everywhere. All the manifestations of life should be valued.</p>
<p><i>Story 6: “The Little Gray Donkey”</i> Merchant: I sell to the people by day and I rob them by night. And they chased his master away.</p>	<p>The merchant is money-minded. At last, the merchant is punished.</p>
<p><i>Story 7: “The Clever Crab”</i> Moral: If you cheat on the earth, the earth will cheat on you.</p>	<p>Humans feel superior by oppressing nature. However, they do not realise that their destructive action will ultimately lead to their doom.</p>
<p><i>Story 8: “The Monkey King”</i> Human King: Save the fruit! Save the fruit! Monkey King: Do not be afraid! I will save you!</p>	<p>Human beings worry about their material possessions, reducing nature to resources for human consumption. In contrast to the behaviour of humans, animal world presents compassion and respect towards fellow members.</p>

<p><i>Story 9: "The Golden Goose"</i> Moral: The greatest wealth is the wealth of kindness.</p>	The philosophy of kindness is highlighted.
<p><i>Story 10: "The Magic Pig"</i> Many people thought the pigs would be delicious and wanted to buy them to eat. Old woman: These are my children. How could I sell my own children?</p>	<p>It exposes the destructive minds of human beings. It does not value nature, but reduce it as resources to meet their selfish desires. Looking beyond the commercial transaction in human-animal relationship — a relationship of care, affection and wellbeing is more important.</p>
<p><i>Story 11: "The Magic Elephant"</i> Moral: Pride leads to a fall, but humility is rewarded in the end.</p>	Importance of kindness is emphasised.

7. Conclusion

Ecological consciousness in tune with the *sūtras* of Buddhism has been rightly juxtaposed in *Buddha Stories*. The stories encourage people to value and appreciate nature and respect every living being of the ecosystems. Resisting the hegemonic discourses that reproduce and maintain inequalities in societies, the beneficial discourses will benefit the subjugated class by raising the consciousness of the ecologically destructive communities “about the impact of their societies on others, both human and non-human, close or distant, and present and future generations” (Stibbe, 2014, p. 120). Animal rights activist, Dunayer (2001) is also aware of the oppressive nature of the widely accepted discourses and makes linguistic analysis of different discourses on nonhuman animals specifically. To aspire for a harmonious integration with nature, a closer look at prevalent animal discourses is demanded. This is because “the animal rights movement is aware of the power of language and makes deliberate attempts to change language” (Stibbe, 2001, p. 157). Human cognition related to ecology needs to be reformed through language. Following the idea of linguistic relativity, the structure of the language one speaks influences one’s world view or the way one conceptualises the reality around.

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