THE BUDDHA AT BEDTIME TREASURY



The Buddha at Bedtime Treasury
Dharmachari Nagaraja

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Story Editor and Additional Writing: Lou Kuenzler
Head of Design: Karen Smith
Designer: Alice Claire Coleman
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THE BUDDHA AT BEDTIME TREASURY

STORIES OF WISDOM, COMPASSION AND MINDFULNESS TO READ WITH YOUR CHILD

DHARMACHARI NAGARAJA

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ABOUT THIS BOOK

Welcome to this treasury of Buddhist tales to share with your child at bedtime. Through my radio broadcasting work, I have discovered that nothing captures listeners' attention or gets a response quite like a good story. It was this observation that gave me the idea of retelling some of the Jataka Tales – ancient narratives, which are believed to have been told by the Buddha himself. My aim was to make the tales more accessible, not just to Buddhists but to everyone – and particularly to children. The collection of stories in this book is the result, and I hope that you enjoy sharing them with your child.

The Stories

In today's world, most people are used to experiencing stories through media such as radio, film and TV. In contrast, through the tales in this book, I hope to offer you the opportunity to take on the active mantle of storyteller. By engaging with the tales and reading them aloud with or to your child, you can create a powerful intimacy and set sail together into a world of wonder and imagination – sharing sights, sounds and, indeed, many feelings along the way. Stories, or parables, have been used throughout the ages and across cultures to communicate all sorts of important messages. The Buddha, for example, recognized that storytelling was the perfect vehicle to communicate his teachings (see pages 15–19). So what is it that makes stories such useful educational tools? Firstly, their varied settings, characters and plots provide listeners with something much more interesting and enchanting than any bare facts or theoretical concepts ever could. Secondly, stories often offer something personal with which listeners can associate, not only making the information conveyed easier to assimilate and understand but also easier to remember. And thirdly, stories encourage listeners to conjure up pictures of the action in their own head and therefore to engage more actively with any underlying messages.

Children, in particular, tend to respond well to stories. In fact, there is no better way to engage and nurture a child's imagination and capacity for understanding complex issues than with the help of well-written stories. Reading the stories in this book to your children will transport them to all sorts of magical settings, full of lively characters, where they will learn many valuable lessons about themselves and the world around them without feeling in any way pressurized or patronized.



All the stories start in a similar way: your child is asked to relax, be still and listen carefully. This is to promote a focused yet tranquil state of mind in which they will be particularly receptive to listening, absorbing information, thinking creatively and allowing themselves to be transported into the tales. This state will also encourage them to drift off to sleep after being read to at bedtime.

Through a wide range of settings, characters and predicaments, each story explores an aspect of the four primary Buddhist principles or values, known as the Four Noble Truths (see page 16), and of the Noble Eightfold Path (see pages 17–19), which the Buddha taught were fundamental to a contented life. At the end of every story, the key lesson of the tale is highlighted, as well as the challenges and solutions encountered, which will encourage conversation between you and your child on all manner of topics. This way, you can explore your child's developing views about themselves and the world, and help them to process any difficulties they might be going through.

CHOOSING A STORY

You don't need to read the book from start to finish. Each night, encourage your child to choose a story based on the title that appeals most, or the picture or character they are drawn to. Alternatively, you

could choose for them, based on key themes that you feel might help your child most at that particular time (the contents page gives a useful summary of these and there's an index of themes at the end of the book to help you, too). For example, if you are worried that your child is finding it difficult to be accepted into a new school or some other new situation, you might read "Tintoretto, the Mouse from Town"; or if you think your child is feeling sad about the loss of something or someone (perhaps you've moved house, they've changed schools or they've suffered a bereavement), you might read "The Teddy Bear Tussle", with its theme of being brave and letting go.

OPENING UP TO MEDITATION

You may also like to encourage your child to explore one of the key aspects of Buddhism: meditation. The stories can be a useful starting point in this process, helping to relax and calm your child. Later in this introduction, I provide advice on incorporating meditation into your child's bedtime routine. You'll also find guided meditations inspired by the stories that you can do with your child at the back of the book.

Above all, enjoy the opportunity to share with your child the peace and understanding these simple yet profound Buddhist tales can awaken.



The Buddha and Buddhism

The timeless message of the Buddha continues to speak to millions of people around the world. With its emphasis on the reality of change in our lives, the importance of compassion for others, and its focus on the management of the mind to avoid unproductive anxiety and illusion, Buddhism seems in tune with many of the insights of contemporary psychology and education. For many it offers guidance on ethical and moral behaviour, as well as practical assistance in coping with the stresses of day-to-day living – skills that our children need now more than ever.

Buddhism is based on the teachings of the Buddha. The word "Buddha" means "enlightened one" and reflects the great wisdom the Buddha achieved in his lifetime. He began life as a privileged Nepalese prince called Siddharta Gautama, born around 566 BC. The oral traditions surrounding his life record that he grew increasingly troubled by the suffering he saw beyond the palace walls. He abandoned his position to search for an answer to the misery he saw in daily life. The Buddha wandered for years studying with wise men, living simply and learning to meditate, but he was dissatisfied with the answers to life's problems he encountered.

Finally the Buddha's enlightenment came as he meditated beneath a bodhi tree. He developed an understanding of life that he came to call the "Four Noble Truths". These truths formed the basis of the Buddha's new philosophy and he rapidly gained a group of followers who were inspired by his teachings. After the Buddha's death in around 486 BC these followers continued to develop the ideas he'd initiated. Buddhism began

to spread throughout India and then into Nepal, Bhutan, China, Mongolia and Japan.

In Tibet (China), the spreading of the wisdom of the Buddha was symbolized by the conch shell. The shell could be blown like a trumpet, sending the Buddha's words throughout the world.



Today Buddhism is one of the fastest-growing spiritual movements in the West. The teachings of Buddhism may seem deceptively simple but in fact are both subtle and complex. The tales in this collection aim to help the young reader explore how the Buddha's insights can help them in their daily life, just as Buddhism has helped millions of people around the world for thousands of years.



What Are the Buddha's Teachings?

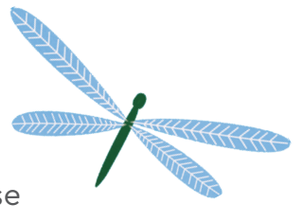
The teachings of the Buddha promote fundamental positive principles and practices that transcend time and culture. As well as providing guidance on ethical and moral behaviour, Buddhism offers practical strategies for how to cope with the anxieties and struggles of daily life, skills that can help both our children and us to flourish no matter what life throws at us.

THE THREE JEWELS

In Buddhism, choosing the Buddha as a role model is known as "going for refuge to the Buddha". There are three established "refuges" in Buddhism – or things that help us along our journey – called the Three Jewels. Making them the guiding lights in your life means that you are following the path of Buddhism. The Three Jewels are:

- **The Buddha** – referring to the "ideal" of Buddhahood as well as to the historical Buddha himself
- **The Dharma** – the collection of the Buddha's teachings and practices, which together provide a map that leads us to our goal
- **The Sangha** – the people we travel with on our journey through life, and who help and encourage us to follow the way of Buddhism

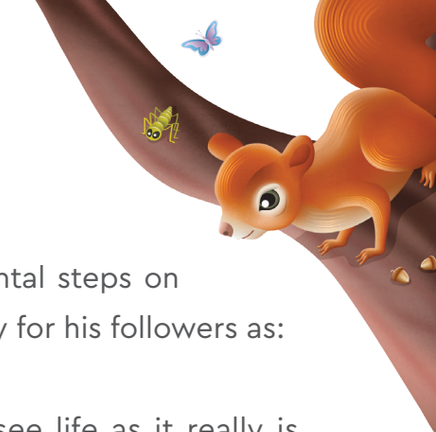
THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS



In addition, the Buddha identified the Four Noble Truths, Buddhism's founding principles. I have set these out below. Consider these in light of your own life and the lives of your children, who learn by your example:

- **First Truth:** Life inevitably involves suffering, whether physical or psychological. Many might find this view initially pessimistic. But for the Buddha this truth was neither optimistic nor pessimistic, simply realistic – the way things actually are.
- **Second Truth:** The reason we suffer is that we want things we do not or cannot have. Whether we want fame or fortune, or simply to be free from negative emotions (such as jealousy or anger), we become unhappy when life fails to live up to our expectations.
- **Third Truth:** The cure for suffering is to stop wanting. If we are prepared to make the effort to let go of our desire for what we don't have, happiness will follow. Of course many could argue that a better way to happiness would simply be to go and get the things we want. The Buddhist response is that we can never get everything we want, partly because the more we have, the more we want.
- **Fourth Truth:** The way to stop wanting more is to follow the Noble Eightfold Path, which focuses not on changing things around us, but instead on changing our own mind about how we view ourselves, things, others and life.

THE NOBLE EIGHTFOLD PATH



The Buddha taught that there are eight fundamental steps on the path to Enlightenment. He set these out clearly for his followers as:

- **Right Understanding:** This involves trying to see life as it really is, not how we believe it is or want it to be, accepting that hardship is part and parcel of life. For example, when a child starts school, they need to understand that first they have to learn the routine of school, where things are, how to behave, and so on. They can't just get into the classroom and expect to know it all. When we understand that life will be hard, even frustrating at times, we can meet any difficulties that arise more openly and creatively.
- **Right Intention:** The Buddha teaches that, along with Right Understanding, we need to show wholehearted commitment and persistence in our intention to do something. At school, for example, a child needs to *intend* to learn for learning to be successful.
- **Right Speech:** How we talk to ourselves and other people can have an impact not only on our experience of life, but also on our confidence and trust in ourselves and others. Right Speech means to speak truthfully, compassionately and considerately at all times.
- **Right Action:** This means treating others and everything around us as we would like ourselves and our belongings to be treated. So, for example, being kind and generous to classmates and looking after each other's and the school's property all follow the path of Right Action.

- ✿ **Right Livelihood:** For adults, this means being aware of the impact of our work on the environment and others. For children it's about undertaking everything they do, whether school work or pastimes, with care and consideration, ensuring that they don't negatively impact on other people or their surroundings. The Buddha taught that a lack of respect for life in our work or play is a barrier to progress on the path to Enlightenment.
- ✿ **Right Effort:** Applying ourselves to tasks with patience, care and attention makes a positive outcome more likely. If we are tense, slapdash, impatient or obsessive in our work, we are more likely to make mistakes and our efforts will be fruitless. The aim is to cultivate an attitude of steady and cheerful determination in everything we do. Children often throw themselves into tasks with great enthusiasm but then quickly become frustrated. Remind them to slow down and take their time!
- ✿ **Right Mindfulness:** Whatever we do, at any age, our minds can easily get distracted. It's completely normal and natural for the mind to wander. However, when the mind does this, we are not inhabiting the present moment, fully appreciating all that moment has to offer. The Buddha teaches that the path to true inner peace requires complete focus in the present, rather than looking backward or forward. So, for example, a child who is opening a gift on their birthday would be better giving all their attention to that one act, rather than eagerly anticipating opening the next gift, or thinking about what they received in the last one, or the piece of cake they just ate.
- ✿ **Right Concentration:** If our attention is not distracted, we can really focus on everything we do. In this way, we become more fully attuned to ourselves and the world around us – we experience a sense of being at one with the world. No doubt you will have seen this when your child is calmly caught up in a favourite hobby.

The themes and guidelines of the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path provide the backbone for the stories in this book. Each story presents different dilemmas and solutions in a way that prepares young listeners to meet these challenges in their own lives. In "The Spoilt Prince", for example, Prince Percival is given every toy, item of clothing or sweet treat he ever asks for. Yet, he doesn't find happiness until all his possessions are washed away and he learns the simple pleasures of compassion and companionship.

By deepening your child's understanding of the ways of Buddhism, even within the subtlety of this kind of storytelling, we encourage the practice of positive qualities, such as patience, kindness, love and gentle, humble self-confidence. And by using the stories and morals as a point of focus, we provide a gateway to that elusive downtime and, ultimately, to deep, restorative sleep.



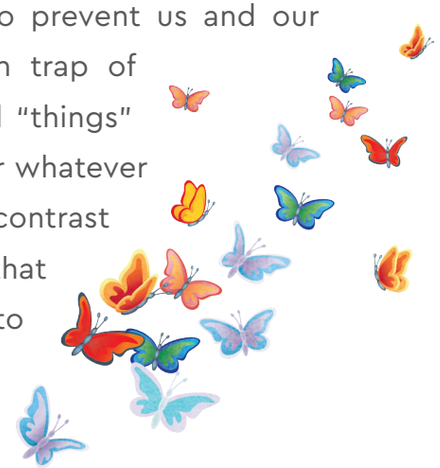


Why We Need Buddhism Today

Modern life can, at times, be rife with stress – whether about work, relationships, money or a whole range of other matters. Fortunately, ancient Buddhist teachings can help us to deal with this stress by encouraging us to infuse our all-too-often hectic, goal-driven lives with more of a sense of peace, love and compassion.

And it's not just adults who suffer from stress and anxiety. Children, too, have to cope with all sorts of stressful issues from an early age these days – for example, peer pressure, academic expectations, bullying, family breakdown. This means that the wise words of the Buddha can be just as beneficial for them, encouraging them to have a positive approach to life's problems and helping them to find a calm place inside themselves whenever they need it – a safe inner refuge.

Buddhist principles can also help to prevent us and our children from falling into the modern trap of always "wanting more" – as if external "things" in themselves, whether toys, clothes or whatever else, are going to bring happiness. In contrast to such materialism, Buddhism teaches that children, like adults, will only develop into truly happy, well-rounded individuals by looking inward and recognizing the wonder of their own existence.



Another Buddhist tenet that is particularly relevant today is that we should be mindful of and appreciate every single, precious moment – as each is gone in the blink of an eye and no two are ever quite the same. This teaching not only encourages our children to focus on experiencing life to the full, but also helps them to accept the impermanence of all things, making it easier for them to understand changes that occur in their life – whether moving house, starting a new school, growing older or losing a loved one.



What is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness is a quality of gentle attention that we can bring to our moment-to-moment experience at any time we choose in order to help us feel more engaged, fulfilled and calm. It is the ability to be open and present to what is actually happening, as we really are, whether we are walking, eating, playing, reading a story or even trying to get to sleep. For children this means encouraging them to let their attention settle on a single chosen object or activity and to become fully absorbed in it. Psychologists today contend that being mindful can increase a child's "flourishing", making it easier for a child to:

- ✿ gain greater appreciation of and enjoyment from what they do
- ✿ adopt a sense of calm and quiet contemplation
- ✿ deal with difficulties and anxieties in their lives
- ✿ respond to desires with compassion, not frustration or anger
- ✿ tune in more deeply to others' feelings and build deeper relationships
- ✿ compromise, arbitrate and solve problems
- ✿ develop the self-confidence to accept themselves just as they are

You can be mindful about pretty much anything. As you go about your daily routine, encourage your child to focus fully on what is happening – brushing their teeth, getting dressed, eating dinner and so on. You could start by asking a question, such as: "Can you feel the bristles of the toothbrush on your gums?"



"What does that sweater feel like on your skin? How is that different to your raincoat?" And, for example, when you are eating cake together, encourage your child to really take their time, to taste it and enjoy the texture, too. Eventually, with practice, your child will begin to notice these sensations more for themselves.

Some experts believe that mindfulness works, in part, by helping people to simply accept their experiences (including painful emotions) rather than reacting to them angrily or turning away and ignoring them. As children grow and face new challenges, mindfulness will remain a skill that can help them build their confidence, cope with stress calmly and constructively, and cultivate increased inner wisdom. Being more mindful also involves learning to be non-judgemental and compassionate toward whatever arises in our moment-to-moment experience. This kind, non-judgemental attitude is the foundation of emotional intelligence, healthy social relationships and sound mental health throughout life.

The stories in this book encourage mindfulness in both your children and yourselves, the parents. As you prepare your child for bedtime, one or both of you may become completely distracted (what parent hasn't hurried through bedtime in anticipation of their own quiet time?). Choosing a story starts the process of not only catching your child's attention – but also of catching yours. With gentle encouragement and patience, as you focus on the illustrations and engage with the characters in each story, your child's mind and body will soon become more peaceful. And so will yours.



Introducing Meditation

One of the key elements of Buddhism is developing the practice of meditation. Meditation teaches us many important and valuable skills. We learn to calm our minds, we learn to disengage from the dramas and distractions of the day, and we discover a still place from where we can achieve a new level of awareness. Working with the ideas in this book is an easy and enjoyable way to introduce meditation to your child.

You can incorporate meditation into your child's bedtime routine – either instead of or after reading one of the stories in this book, which have a powerful meditative quality themselves in that they focus your child's attention and encourage them to visualize settings, characters and events.

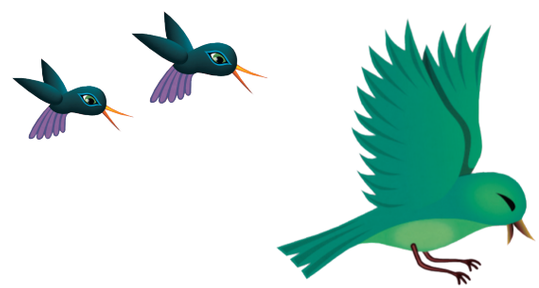
Meditation will calm your child before bed. In time they can learn to do the practice by themselves whenever they are feeling anxious, but at first try to set aside five to ten minutes each day in which to do a guided meditation (see pages 333–48).

One of the best methods of meditating is to simply sit still and focus your attention for a period of time on your breathing or on an object, such as a flower, a leaf or another inspiring item or image. Meditation begins by stilling the body and then works to calm the mind. In everyday life, your mind is like a choppy sea. As you meditate, you descend down into the quieter, stiller depths of the ocean (your being) and, afterwards, when you return your attention to everyday life, you find that the water's surface (your mind) has become much calmer. By teaching your child how to meditate, you are helping them to connect with their inner calm, their innate creativity and the essence of who they really are.

Far from being an inaccessible spiritual activity, as many people still believe, meditation can be very simple and fun for children, as well as enhancing their self-understanding and self-acceptance. Nowadays, forms of the practice are even finding their way into some schools to help with behavioural problems, such as hyperactivity and aggression. Once your child has learned how to meditate (see pages 333–48), they will be able to access a safe, quiet space in their mind at any time they feel a need for calm amid chaos.

One of the easiest meditation techniques for children to learn is visualization. Through creating vivid images in their mind's eye, a child can tap into their own potential, and into positive qualities, such as kindness and generosity. Visualization is particularly beneficial for children who have low self-esteem, as it can help them to imagine positive outcomes, which give them the confidence to interact better with others and make friends more easily and successfully.

By teaching your child how to consciously meditate, you'll bring deep contentment and focus into their everyday life.





Before You Begin

Before you begin to read the stories that follow with your child, it's worth spending a few minutes doing a simple stretching and relaxation exercise to bring both your child's and your own attention fully into the present. As well as helping to calm an agitated mind and/or body, the exercise will make it easier for both of you to concentrate on the story. And, of course, the exercise can also be highly enjoyable in itself.

Learning this simple technique also gives your child the tools to start releasing physical tension so that they can unwind and relax any time they feel stressed out or anxious. This means that they will know peace of mind is only ever a breath away.

Start by inviting your child to lie down either on their bed or on the floor with a pillow under their head. Sit comfortably beside them and ask them to gently turn their awareness to their breathing. Take a couple of deep breaths together – in and out. Then, when you are ready, say in a slow and relaxed voice:

"Close your eyes. Wiggle your toes ... wiggle, wiggle ... and relax. Now point your toes away from you ... and pull your toes up toward you. Away from you, toward you ... and relax.

Now, gently take a really big breath and imagine air filling your whole body, from your head down to your toes, as if you are blowing up like a balloon. Slowly let the breath out, little by little, letting your body sink right down into your bed or the floor. Now, squeeze your hands into tight little balls ... and open them up, stretching your fingers out wide. Squeeze your hands tightly again and open them up, stretching your fingers as wide as you can ... and relax.

Take another really big breath in and imagine air filling your whole body, from your head down to your toes, as if you are blowing up like a balloon. Slowly let the breath out, little by little, allowing your body to sink right down into the comfort of your bed or the floor.

Now, stretch your arms above your head and your feet, so that you feel as long as possible ... and relax as much as you can. Stretch again ... and relax. Stretch again ... and relax.



Now, bring your arms back down to your sides and place your hands on your tummy. Scrunch up your face, so that all your muscles tighten as much as possible ... and relax. Now, give a big smile ... and relax all the muscles in your face. Once more, smile ... and relax.

Breathe in slowly and deeply through your nose and feel your tummy get bigger. Breathe out slowly through your mouth and feel your tummy go lower. Relax, relax your whole body ...

Keep breathing deeply until you feel really relaxed, relaxed enough to listen to and soak up the magical story you're about to be told."