

## **Compassion As A Pertinent Component In The Way Of 'Middle Path': A Study Of The 'Ruru Jataka' In The Bharhut Sculptures**

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### **Abstract**

*Compassion is identified as one of the pertinent qualities that a person must have developed in order to attain the realisation of enlightenment as per Buddhism. The quality of compassion can be translated into Sanskrit as 'Karuna'. As per this quality one would attain a state of readiness to tolerate the pain of others. The Narration of 'Ruru' jataka on the railing medallion at Bharhut is basically an attempt to convey the public regarding the need to practise compassion in life. It is due to compassion that the golden stag Ruru helps a man who was trapped in the water current of a river by pulling him out. Once again Ruru helps the same man by requesting the king to spare him when the king was pointing an arrow at him for betraying the Stag for his selfish motive. The king, being moved by the compassionate behaviour of the deer, invited him to his court where the deer delivers an elaborate talk on life, its purpose and the duties one is expected to fulfil. The visual representation of Ruru jataka on the railing medallion at Bharhut stupa needs to be understood as one of the most important sculptures Indian artistic genius had ever attempted. The present study is an attempt to explore the thematic as well the aesthetical aspects related to the same.*

## **Introduction**

India, in a broader sense, is understood as one of the earliest civilizations that has a history of not less than about 5000 years and had flourished almost at the same time as the Mesopotamian and the Egyptian civilizations had existed. Indian art provides one of the finest specimens of art ever mankind has attempted. Indian art is not only highly aesthetic but also carries religious themes. For a better understanding of the traditional Indian art, basic understanding of various religions is also required. The reason for the fact of the matter shows that various religions in India attempted themselves to propagate their ideals through art. In this regard an influence of Buddhist religion can be seen from the Mauryan period onwards. After the Maurya dynasty, artworks related to the Shunga dynasty can be seen. Though the Shunga dynasty belongs to the Hindu religion, due to the social harmony that existed between the two religions, Buddhist art also flourished a lot during this time. Bharhut stupa as well as the related sculptures can be considered as a good example to establish this unique religious harmony.

The study of Buddhism makes one understand that life is suffering at a deeper level. Buddha says that life can be made more significant by identifying and takes away the root cause of suffering. The high ideals as suggested in Buddhism are basically meant to create peace in individuals as well as in society. As per Buddhism there are four noble truths which are very pertinent in understanding and tackling the difficulties of life.

As part of tackling human sufferings of life and also to take the mass into a state of peacefulness in a qualitative sense, Buddha recommended methods to be followed by all. The first identified truth of 'dukha', as per the four noble truths, are due to sufferings, anxiety and dissatisfaction. Deaths, growing old, physical as well as mental problems are some of the problems that people suffer. Without understanding the fact that everything is undergoing change, if people try to consider the present as being static, then they would definitely develop tension in their mind. When people are not able to reach up to their own expectations in life and also realise that life is impermanent, then naturally their sufferings will accumulate. 'Dukha' also originates from ignorance and the same can be considered as the second truth. The cessation of 'dukha' is considered as the third truth. The path leading to the cessation of 'dukha' is understood as the fourth truth. (wiki).

Buddha says that the root cause of 'dukha' is human desire and it occurs from the ignorance of the true nature of things. Buddha says that 'dukha' can be stopped or removed. Buddha put forward the 'noble eightfold paths' to tackle the issue of 'dukha' and these noble paths came to be known as the path for liberation. An image of 'Dharma Chakra' has been visualised in order to represent the 'eightfold path' which is a combination of eight interconnected factors and conditions. Following all the aspects together as mentioned in the 'eightfold path' people would be able to eliminate 'dukha'.

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The noble 'eightfold path' is also known as 'Ashtang marga' and the first factor is 'right view'. It means right understanding i.e. one needs to view reality as it is, not to view reality as how it appears to be. 'Right intention' or right-thought can be understood as the second factor and by following the same one would attain freedom and harmlessness. 'Right speech' is considered to be the third factor i.e. speaking in a truthful and non-hurtful way. 'Right action' stands for the fourth factor and the meaning of the same can be interpreted as acting in a non-harmful manner. 'Right livelihood' is considered as the fifth factor i.e. making it in a non-harmful way. All the time one needs to make efforts for improvement and the same is considered as the sixth factor i.e. 'right effort'. 'Right mindfulness' is the seventh factor, i.e. people should have awareness to see things for what they are with clear consciousness. People should also be conscious about the present reality within oneself without any like or dislike. 'Right concentration' is considered as the eighth factor i.e. correct meditation or concentration as explained as the first four jnana (wiki)

Buddha preached the eightfold path for all people to follow so as to get free from all sufferings. In order to reach the teachings of Buddha into the inner deep of people, Buddhist monks used art and engaged artists to make great works of art. Even in the history of Buddhist art there were many schools of art that existed in different times and different places. Among the various schools of art, the art of Bharhut provides one of the best examples of Buddhist art.

### **The Bharhut Sculptures**

The place Bharhut is located in the south east of Madhya Pradesh and about 190 km southwest of Allahabad. It was inhabited by the 'Bhoro' people; hence it is believed that they only founded this place. Major General Alexander Cunningham had discovered the Bharhut Buddhist stupa in 1873. The sculptural as well as other monuments are presently kept in the Indian museum, Kolkota and in the Municipal Museum of Allahabad. These monuments were made during the 'Shunga' dynasty who ruled for about 112 years starting from 185 B.C.E. Though the rulers of 'Shunga' dynasty belong to Hinduism, they never persecuted the Buddhists and numerous Buddhist monuments can be attributed to the Shunga period. The Bharhut stupa was not built at a particular time, but it was begun and passed through various phases. It is generally believed that the construction of the stupa was started in 250 B.C.E., at the time of the great Ashoka. Initially it was built with bricks and later in the 2 c. B.C.E. it was enlarged and added an encircling railing with four 'toranas'.

In the early phase of Buddhism 'stupa' came into sight as an object of veneration. 'Stupa' looks hemispherical in shape. It has got a circular shape in the base. The form may have emerged from pre Buddhist burial mounds. It is believed that the physical remains of Buddha used to be kept inside 'stupa'. Besides that the physical remains of great Buddhist monks were also believed to be kept in 'stupas'. There is an umbrella placed on the top of

this mound. The whole 'stupa' is enclosed with railings and four splendidly decorated gateways have been attached to the railing. Relief sculptures can be seen on the rail medals and also on the 'toranas'. Buddhist ideals as explained in 'jataka' stories have been depicted over here. In addition to that various events in the life of Buddha and popular mythological figures have also been depicted over here. Since the Bharhut sculptures were developed during the 'Hinayana' period, Buddha was represented in symbolic forms, not in human forms.

### **The Ruru Jataka**

Some of the very basic principles of Buddhism i.e. compassion towards living beings and nature had been a source of inspiration for the depiction of Bharhut sculptures. Though the Bharhut sculptures provide narration of numerous stories from 'jataka', the present study attempts to indicate the aspect of futility of accumulating material pleasures at the cost of compassion. The story of 'Ruru' jataka as given on the railings of Bharhut stupa is also attempting to convey the importance of inculcating one of the golden principles of Buddhism i.e. compassion. As per the story, there was a deer called Ruru who lived in a thick forest. It never attempted to come in contact with humans. The deer was not an ordinary deer but filled with innumerable qualities and specialties which made it different from other beings. The colour of the deer was gold and different colours of rubies, emerald and sapphires could be seen in the form of spots on the base colour gold. Besides that the hair of the deer was very soft as well as silky. The eye of the deer appears to be sky blue in colour. Besides that its hooves and horns appear as sculpted with precious stones. Its mere presence in the forest would attract the attention of all. Another specialty of this deer was that it has got intelligence. It also had the ability to converse in human language and this ability is due to its previous births. It also knew that humans basically used to have ugly mentality and they appear cruel too. Hence the deer purposely avoided any meeting with humans. Despite the fact that the deer knew the nature of humans, it was compassionate to all. Once upon a time the deer was roaming around in the forest. Then all of a sudden it heard a heart-rending cry of a man who was trapped and being carried away in the water current of a river. That pitiful scene naturally created compassion in the deer and decided to help the man. Consequently, the deer jumped into the river. The deer, as part of rescuing him, instructed the man to cling onto its body. But the man, in panic, instead of obeying what the deer had instructed him, all of a sudden sat on the body of the delicate deer. However, the deer, despite the heavy weight being put on him by the man, somehow managed to reach the bank of the river and thus rescued the man. The man was shivering due to cool water. But the deer provided the man with warmth with his caresses and gradually the man gained consciousness. Just after that the deer asked the man to go to his place and join his companions. The rescued man has conveyed his heartfelt gratitude to the deer. The man

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also said that no friend or relative has ever provided him with such comforts that the deer had done towards him. The man also conveyed to the deer that he would always be at the deer's service and expecting the deer's command to do service. The deer replied that if this is your decision, then do one thing that please do not tell anyone that you were rescued by the most beautiful one on earth. It is because men basically do not have any mercy and are not guided by principles. The man assured to keep his pledge to protect the one who had given him a second life. It is at the same time the queen of that country happened to see a strange dream. As per that dream the queen saw a very elegant golden colour deer that appeared as standing on a throne. The most surprising thing is that it was preaching 'Dharma' in a clear human voice. The queen was very much attracted by the beauty of the deer and requested the king to bring the deer for her. In order to fulfil the queen's desire, the king made a royal announcement that he would give a rich village and 10 most beautiful women to those who would give any information regarding the whereabouts of the deer. Upon hearing the royal announcement, the man who was once rescued by the deer couldn't control himself and went to the king to get the most tempting reward by disclosing the whereabouts of the rare deer, Ruru. The king and his men were taken to the deep inside of the forest where the deer dwelt. When the deer was spotted by the man, he raised his hand to show the golden deer to others. At the same time, surprisingly, all of a sudden his hand got detached from the body and fell down as if somebody had cut-off his hand. By that time the king saw the beautiful golden deer and his eyes were wide open due to curiosity. The deer noticed that all the arrows were pointed at him only and realised that there is no place to hide for escape. However, on the verge of death the deer very gently asked the king in the clearest human voice how you reached here as I have never walked the path of humans. Then the deer also said that it is better to take out a wooden piece from water than to save an ungrateful man. The conversation of the deer naturally created curiosity in the king and he asked to explain what really had happened. The deer has explained the whole story. The king was moved by the compassion and courage of the deer. The king also became very angry at the selfish man and turned towards the ungrateful man by pulling up the string of the bow to finish him off. But at the same time Ruru, the deer requested the king to forgive this ungrateful man. The request of the deer was accepted by the king and invited the deer to visit his palace. The golden deer accepted the invitation to become the royal guest. Ruru was taken to the kingdom on a royal coach in a pompous parade along with dignitaries. The deer delivered numerous discourses to various luminaries, princesses, queen and the ruler at the court for some days. Later the deer returned to its abode for good.

The Bharhut vedika provides one of the important relief sculptures called Mrga or Ruru Jataka. The story has been visualised on a medallion which is available at Indian

museum, Kolkata. Continuous narration was used as a mode of expression. As per this method various events taking place in different times would be shown at a stretch where incidents of past and present would be presented at a time. The whole story has been narrated in a single round panel. The whole story of Ruru Jataka takes place at first in a forest where a golden stag lived and is called Ruru. The first episode shows the drowning scene of a merchant in a river where the stag helped the man to come out of this river. Hence a man sitting on a golden stag is shown in a river and the same is in the foreground of the panel. The second episode takes place on the right upper half of the composition. Here the unfaithful youth showed the where-about of the stag by pointing out at him for the reward announced by the king. The king and others are also shown pointing their arrows at the stag. A forest scene can be seen here where a group of deer are in their natural habitat. The centre of composition draws the most important and climax of the story. The image of the golden stag draws the centre of attention in the composition. The stag is shown giving a very impressive speech where the king dropped his weapon and listening very carefully to the golden stag.

Any attempt of analysing the relief sculptures at Bharhut would reveal flatness in its appearance. Hence these sculptures would not give any scope for depth with reference to background. The figures look like three dimensional made with soft clay by kids and appear on flat board. Here the artists of Bharhut attempted for various kinds of poses of the human body, but at prima facie one would definitely say that the details are dominating and not achieving the status of an organic whole of the human body. However, one would see here that the artists had taken a keen interest in all aspects of life. We can also see a naive freshness in the treatment of figures. Another aspect is that during the Maurya period we can see Achaemenid influence which is lacking in Bharhut sculptures. If we analyse Mauryan sculptures, then we can see less human figures. But in Bharhut we can see plenty of human figures in the crowd.

### **Conclusion**

The Bharhut sculptures are considered to be the earlier phase of Indian art. The Shunga dynasty, though believed in Hinduism by faith, did not persecute the Buddhist faith. Contrary to the Mauryan sculptures of earlier periods, the Bharhut sculptures do not show any Achaemenid influence. The sculptures appear flat and lack three-dimensionality. However the theme of the sculptures are drawn from Buddhism and tried to highlight the high ideals of Buddhism. One of the purposes of the whole artistic practices inspired by religious ideals is in fact an attempt to make humans sensitive to others feelings and emotions. Compassion is one such quality that needs to be inculcated amongst all people for betterment of life. The sculptures at Bharhut are in fact a testimony to this fact as it reveals the need for compassion as described in Jataka stories. The story as narrated on the

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round medallion reveals the story of a golden stag that exhibits unconditional compassion to the one who attempted to endanger its life. Thereafter, the stag also attempts to change the perception of the king towards life by explaining its meaning. The golden stag, the most beautiful being on earth, has the capacity to give excellent speeches in human language and was considered to be one of the earlier reincarnations of the Buddha. Giving moral speeches to an individual would have a limited effect. But if the sermon was delivered to a king, gradually the whole people of the country would be benefitted by following it and would lead to spirituality.

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