

Devoted American Couple Assists Buddhists in Need

by Jin Bup Frank Tedesco

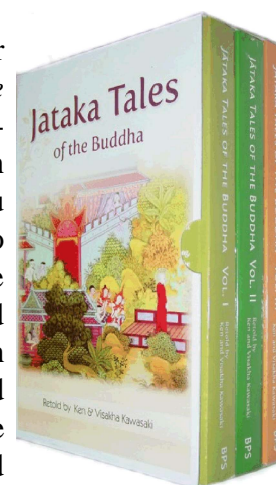


Ken and Visakha Kawasaki are a remarkably dedicated couple. They are "baby boomer" Americans who discovered Buddhist art and literature in the late 1970s when they traveled in India on a world tour. After long careers as teachers of English in Japan and teacher-training programs in refugee programs in Southeast Asia, Ken and Visakha are now retired and living in Kandy, Sri Lanka. They are far from inactive, though, since they continue to give all their time to writing, teaching and managing their non-profit charitable organization. They have invested decades of their lives creatively promoting Buddha's teachings and helping Buddhists in need, even in American prisons.

To appeal for more funds to expand their benevolent efforts, Ken and Visakha founded the Buddhist Relief Mission, a 501(c)3 registered charity in Michigan in 1988. They are its current directors. The BRM "supports Buddhist charities, education and welfare projects around the world." The range of BRM activities is formiable. Ken and Visakha have created Buddhist teaching DVDs and Buddhist games and puzzles. In addition, they are helping to support a monk who runs a rest home for sick and elderly monks in Sri Lanka and trying to support desperately poor Buddhist orphanages on the Thai/Burma border and in Bangladesh. Ken and Visakha have also publicized the plight of a Buddhist academy for young monks in Tripura, India, that was targeted by arsonists. Buddhists in northeastern India are a tiny, persecuted minority as they are in Bangladesh. The Buddhist Relief Mission also came out strongly to support Saffron Revolution monks that were violently suppressed by the military in Burma in 2007.

The Buddhist Relief Mission website <www.brelief.org> describes BRM activities in detail and is illustrated with Ken's excellent photographs, many of which are displayed as slide shows. The site is easy to move around. I heartily urge readers of Modern Buddhism of America to spend time viewing every page of the site and watch the BRM's YouTube channel at <www.youtube.com/user/brelief>. You will be impressed by Ken and Visakha's work. You can also listen to Visakha's clear English narration of Jataka stories as you read along. This is a very useful site to improve and perfect your English. There's traditional Pali chanting and folk music, too.

The Kawasakis' most recent contribution to world Buddhism is their congenial retelling of past life stories of the Buddha. *Jataka Tales of the Buddha: An Anthology* (Buddhist Publication Society, Kandy, 2009) is a three-volume paperback set of 217 birth-stories in 1298 pages, each introduced with a simple lint drawing. The clear and faultless language of the tales is what you would expect from seasoned ESL teachers like the Kawasakis. They are a joy to read and ponder. As readers in Buddhist lands well know, the stories of the previous lives of the Buddha are recounted over and over again to entertain and convey the teachings of karma and right action to young and old alike. Through these often hilarious moral tales we learn how to live prudently in this world without inflicting pain and suffering on others. We also can get a feeling for the Buddha's deep compassion and wisdom in dealing with the personal, family, and social issues of the original sangha. He gives wise advice to kings and common people alike that contemporary politicians ought to take seriously.



Here's a brief example of loving-kindness at the highest political level in a story related by the

Buddha. In No. 55, “Crow's Fat” or *Kaka Jataka* (v.1, 232-4), we encounter a king's advisor who despised all crows because one naughty crow pooped on his freshly shaven head. When an opportunity for revenge suddenly arose, he advised the king to have all the crows in the land killed for their fat even though they had none. The leader of the crows courageously flew to the king's throne and appealed to the king to act justly and with equanimity.

"Sire," the lead crow said calmly to King Brahmadatta, "in ruling his kingdom, a king should never act from passion. Before taking action, a ruler should thoroughly examine a situation. Only then should he do what needs to be done. If, on the other hand, a king acts rashly and without justice, he may cause great fear, even the fear of death, among his subjects. When your advisor prescribed crows' fat, he was merely seeking revenge. He knows that crows have no fat. His intention was to have many crows die simply because he hates them."

"Sage bird," said the king, "you say that crows have no fat. Can you tell me why?"

"Your Majesty," the leader of the crows answered in a clear voice, "crows live in perpetual fear of all humans, who are their enemies. Because of this extreme anxiety and apprehension, crows never develop any fat." King Brahmadatta was so pleased with the crow's teaching that he took the Five Precepts and proclaimed a ban on killing any living creature in his kingdom. He also ordered that the crows be served extra rice every day.

Following the usual formula for concluding a Jataka, the Buddha closes the tale by identifying the past life episode. At the time of the story, Ananda (his closest disciple) was the King Brahmadatta of Kasi and "I was the leader of the crows."

A nice feature of *Jataka Tales of the Buddha* is that you can randomly open any volume to any story and discover an edifying nugget of wisdom to apply to life. You can read the stories to children in religious education classes and also use them to teach courses on Buddhism in college or adult education classes. The third volume also contains a useful glossary of English Buddhist and Pali terms and a glossary of personal names found in the stories. I recommend reading “The Jatakas Reborn,” an informative review of the work, at <www.chiangmai-mail.com/w013/bmm.shtml>. The Kawasakis' publication should be purchased and donated to all temple libraries and added to institutional collections wherever world religions are studied. The price cannot be beat. It is only \$25 for all three volumes in an attractive box (including air mail postage from Sri Lanka!). Volumes can be purchased separately for \$12 each. Order online at <www.brelief.org/jataka/Books/book.html>. A donation to the Buddhist Relief Mission is included in the cost.



From mid-March to mid-April this year Ken and Visakha are again teaching an annual intensive English course for bhikkhus at the monastic Bodhisukha School in Kolkata (Calcutta), West Bengal. No one is paid and it is extremely hot. Volunteer teachers are welcome. Check out <www.brelief.org/biec.html> for particulars.

Anyone can communicate with the Kawasakis directly on Facebook: <www.facebook.com/kenvisakha.kawasaki>.

We are very grateful for the Kawasakis' selfless efforts to help beings caught in the snares of samsara. They messaged me on Skype from Kolkata yesterday, "We're the luckiest people we know." We are fortunate to know them.