



Four Harmonious Friends: A Jataka Story

This story demonstrates harmony, interdependence, cooperation, and friendship between four animals. In Bhutan, a Buddhist country in the Himalayas, it is part of the people's national identity: living in harmony with nature, working together even though there are cultural differences. In this story the elephant represents our body, the monkey the restless mind, the rabbit our emotions, and the bird the soul.

Four animals lived in a forest in Varanasi, in the north of India: an elephant, a monkey, a rabbit and a partridge. They had a disagreement about who owned a beautiful tree, a tree from which all four of them got their food.

The elephant said, "It's my tree because I saw it first!" The monkey replied, "Elephant, do you see any fruit in this tree?" The elephant did not see any fruit in the tree. "Well, elephant," said the monkey, "that's because I ate the fruit long before you saw the tree for the first time! That's why the tree is mine."

Then the rabbit spoke: "Yes, but monkey, long before you ate the fruit, and elephant, long before you saw the tree, I ate leaves from the tree, when it was a very small sapling. Therefore, the tree is mine."

The bird had listened to this discussion and then said: "Boys, the tree is mine, because if I hadn't spat out a seed long ago when I was eating fruit, this tree would never have existed! I helped to plant the seed from which this beautiful big tree grew long before you, rabbit, ate leaves from it, long before you, monkey, ate fruit from it and long before you, elephant, saw the tree."

The elephant, the monkey, and the rabbit admitted that the bird had indeed been the first to know the tree. They all bowed deeply to the partridge and considered it their big brother.

The four animals became friends and decided to share the tree. Together they enjoyed the wonderful scent of the tree, the delicious leaves, the delicious fruit that came on the tree in autumn and the cooling shade in the hot summer.

They worked well together to get to the leaves and fruit. The bird and rabbit shared the leaves and fruit on the lowest branches and those that had fallen to the ground. The monkey climbed the tree to pick higher fruit and drop it for everyone below to eat. And only the elephant could reach the highest branches with its





long trunk to pick leaves and fruit there. With their combined strength, everyone always had enough to eat and none of them had to go hungry.

The other forest animals often saw these friends together: the bird sat on top of the rabbit, the rabbit in turn sat on top of the monkey, who sat on top of the elephant. Since then, they have been called the Four Harmonious Friends by all other animals. They exemplify peace, harmony, cooperation, interdependence, and friendship.