

Jataka Tales of the Buddha : Part I

retold by

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Namo tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammasambuddhassa

Apannaka Jataka

Crossing the Wilderness

Jat 1

While the Buddha was staying at Jetavana Monastery near Savatthi, the wealthy banker, Anathapindika, went one day to pay his respects. His servants carried masses of flowers, perfume, butter, oil, honey, molasses, cloths, and robes. Anathapindika paid obeisance to the Buddha, presented the offerings he had brought, and sat down respectfully. At that time, Anathapindika was accompanied by five hundred friends who were followers of heretical teachers. His friends also paid their respects to the Buddha and sat close to the banker. The Buddha's face appeared like a full moon, and his body was surrounded by a radiant aura. Seated on the red stone seat, he was like a young lion roaring with a clear, noble voice as he taught them a discourse full of sweetness and beautiful to the ear.

After hearing the Buddha's teaching, the five hundred gave up their heretical practices and took refuge in the Triple Gem: the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the

Sangha. After that, they went regularly with Anathapindika to offer flowers and incense and to hear the teaching. They gave liberally, kept the precepts, and faithfully observed the Uposatha Day.¹ Soon after the Buddha left Savatthi to return to Rajagaha, however, these men abandoned their new faith and reverted to their previous beliefs.

Seven or eight months later, the Buddha returned to Jetavana. Again, Anathapindika brought these friends to visit the Buddha. They paid their respects, but Anathapindika explained that they had forsaken their refuge and had resumed their original practices.

The Buddha asked, "Is it true that you have abandoned refuge in the Triple Gem for refuge in other doctrines?" The Buddha's voice was incredibly clear because throughout myriad aeons He had always spoken truthfully.

When these men heard it, they were unable to conceal the truth. "Yes, Blessed One," they confessed. "It is true."

"Disciples," the Buddha said "nowhere between the lowest of hells below and the highest heaven above, nowhere in all the infinite worlds that stretch right and left, is there the equal, much less the superior, of a Buddha. Incalculable is the excellence which springs from obeying the Precepts and from other virtuous conduct."

Then he declared the virtues of the Triple Gem. "By taking refuge in the Triple Gem," He told them, "one escapes from rebirth in states of suffering." He further explained that meditation on the Triple Gem leads through the four stages to Enlightenment.

"In forsaking such a refuge as this," he admonished them, "you have certainly erred. In the past, too, men who foolishly mistook what was no refuge for a real refuge, met disaster. Actually, they fell prey to yakkhas — evil spirits — in the wilderness and were utterly destroyed. In contrast, men who clung to the truth not only survived, but actually prospered in that same wilderness."

Anathapindika raised his clasped hands to his forehead, praised the Buddha, and asked him to tell that story of the past.

"In order to dispel the world's ignorance and to conquer suffering," the Buddha proclaimed, "I practiced the Ten Perfections for countless aeons. Listen carefully, and I will speak."

Having their full attention, the Buddha made clear, as though he were releasing the full moon from behind clouds, what rebirth had concealed from them.

Long, long ago, when Brahmadata was reigning in Baranasi, the Bodhisatta was born into a merchant's family and grew up to be a wise trader. At the same time, in the same city, there was another merchant, a very stupid fellow, with no common sense whatsoever.

One day it so happened that the two merchants each loaded five hundred carts with costly wares of Baranasi and prepared to leave in the same direction at exactly the

same time. The wise merchant thought, "If this silly young fool travels with me and if our thousand carts stay together, it will be too much for the road. Finding wood and water for the men will be difficult, and there won't be enough grass for the oxen. Either he or I must go first."

"Look," he said to the other merchant, "the two of us can't travel together. Would you rather go first or follow after me?"

The foolish trader thought, "There will be many advantages if I take the lead. I'll get a road which is not yet cut up. My oxen will have the pick of the grass. My men will get the choicest wild herbs for curry. The water will be undisturbed. Best of all, I'll be able to fix my own price for bartering my goods." Considering all these advantages, he said, "I will go ahead of you, my friend."

The Bodhisatta was pleased to hear this because he saw many advantages in following after. He reasoned, "Those carts going first will level the road where it is rough, and I'll be able to travel along the road they have already smoothed. Their oxen will graze off the coarse old grass, and mine will pasture on the sweet young growth which will spring up in its place. My men will find fresh sweet herbs for curry where the old ones have been picked. Where there is no water, the first caravan will have to dig to supply themselves, and we'll be able to drink at the wells they have dug. Haggling over prices is tiring work; he'll do the work, and I will be able to barter my wares at prices he has already fixed."

"Very well, my friend," he said, "please go first."

"I will," said the foolish merchant, and he yoked his carts and set out. After a while he came to the outskirts of a wilderness. He filled all of his huge water jars with water before setting out to cross the sixty yojanas² of desert which lay before him.

The yakkha who haunted that wilderness had been watching the caravan. When it had reached the middle, he used his magic power to conjure up a lovely carriage drawn by pure white young bulls. With a retinue of a dozen disguised yakkhas carrying swords and shields, he rode along in his carriage like a mighty lord. His hair and clothes were wet, and he had a wreath of blue lotuses and white water lilies around his head. His attendants also were dripping wet and draped in garlands. Even the bulls' hooves and carriage wheels were muddy.

As the wind was blowing from the front, the merchant was riding at the head of his caravan to escape the dust. The yakkha drew his carriage beside the merchant's and greeted him kindly. The merchant returned the greeting and moved his own carriage to one side to allow the carts to pass while he and the yakkha chatted.

"We are on our way from Baranasi, sir," explained the merchant. "I see that your men are all wet and muddy and that you have lotuses and water lilies. Did it rain while you were on the road? Did you come across pools with lotuses and water lilies?"

"What do you mean?" the yakkha exclaimed. "Over there is the dark-green streak of a jungle. Beyond that there is plenty of water. It is always raining there, and there

are many lakes with lotuses and water lilies." Then, pretending to be interested in the merchant's business, he asked, "What do you have in these carts?"

"Expensive merchandise," answered the merchant.

"What is in this cart which seems so heavily laden?" the yakkha asked as the last cart rolled by.

"That's full of water."

"You were wise to carry water with you this far, but there is no need for it now, since water is so abundant ahead. You could travel much faster and lighter without those heavy jars. You'd be better off breaking them and throwing the water away. Well, good day," he said suddenly, as he turned his carriage. "We must be on our way. We have stopped too long already." He rode away quickly with his men. As soon as they were out of sight, he turned and made his way back to his own city.

The merchant was so foolish that he followed the yakkha's advice. He broke all the jars, without saving even a single cupful of water, and ordered the men to drive on quickly. Of course, they did not find any water, and they were soon exhausted from thirst. At sunset they drew their carts into a circle and tethered the oxen to the wheels, but there was no water for the weary animals. Without water, the men could not cook any rice either. They sank to the ground and fell asleep. As soon as night came, the yakkhas attacked, killing every single man and beast. The fiends devoured the flesh, leaving only the bones, and departed. Skeletons were strewn in every direction, but the five hundred carts stood with their loads untouched. Thus the heedless young merchant was the sole cause of the destruction of the entire caravan.

Allowing six weeks to pass after the foolish trader had left, the Bodhisatta set out with his five hundred carts. When he reached the edge of the wilderness, he filled his water jars. Then he assembled his men and announced, "Let not so much as a handful of water be used without my permission. Furthermore, there are poisonous plants in this wilderness. Do not eat any leaf, flower, or fruit which you have never eaten before, without showing it to me first." Having thus carefully warned his men, he led the caravan into the wilderness.

When they had reached the middle of the wilderness, the yakkha appeared on the path just as before. The merchant noticed his red eyes and fearless manner and suspected something strange. "I know there is no water in this desert," he said to himself. "Furthermore, this stranger casts no shadow. He must be a yakkha. He probably tricked the foolish merchant, but he doesn't realize how clever I am."

"Get out of here!" he shouted at the yakkha. "We are men of business. We do not throw away our water before we see where more is to come from!"

Without saying any more, the yakkha rode away.

As soon as the yakkhas had left, the merchant's men approached their leader and said, "Sir, those men were wearing lotuses and water lilies on their heads. Their clothes and hair were wringing wet. They told us that up ahead there is a thick forest

where it is always raining. Let us throw away our water so that we can proceed quicker with lightened carts."

The merchant ordered a halt and summoned all his men. "Has any man among you ever heard before today," he asked, "that there was a lake or a pool in this wilderness?"

"No, sir," they answered. "It's known as the 'Waterless Desert.' "

"We have just been told by some strangers that it is raining in the forest just ahead. How far does a rain-wind carry?"

"A yojana, sir."

"Has any man here seen the top of even a single storm-cloud?"

"No, sir."

"How far off can you see a flash of lightning?"

"Four or five yojanas, sir."

"Has any man here seen a flash of lightning?"

"No, sir."

"How far off can a man hear a peal of thunder?"

"Two or three yojanas, sir."

"Has any man here heard a peal of thunder?"

"No, sir."

"Those were not men, but yakkhas," the wise merchant told his men. "They are hoping that we will throw away our water. Then, when we are weak and faint, they will return to devour us. Since the young merchant who went before us was not a man of good sense, most likely he was fooled by them. We may expect to find his carts standing just as they were first loaded. We will probably see them today. Press on with all possible speed, without throwing away a drop of water!"

Just as the merchant had predicted, his caravan soon came upon the five hundred carts with the skeletons of men and oxen strewn in every direction. He ordered his men to arrange his carts in a fortified circle, to take care of the oxen, and to prepare an early supper for themselves. After the animals and men had all safely bedded down, the merchant and his foremen, swords in hand, stood guard all through the night.

At daybreak the merchant replaced his own weak carts for stronger ones and exchanged his own common goods for the most costly of the abandoned

merchandise. When he arrived at his destination, he was able to barter his stock of wares at two or three times their value. He returned to his own city without losing a single man out of all his company.

This story ended, the Buddha said, "Thus it was, laymen, that in times past, the foolish came to utter destruction, while those who clung to the truth escaped from the yakkhas' hands, reached their goal in safety, and returned to their homes again.

"This clinging to the truth not only endows happiness even up to rebirth in the Realm of Brahma,³ but also leads ultimately to Arahantship. Following untruth entails rebirth either in the four states of punishment or in the lowest conditions of mankind." After the Buddha had expounded the Four Truths, those five hundred disciples were established in the Fruit of the First Path.

The Buddha concluded his lesson by identifying the Birth as follows: "The foolish young merchant was Devadatta,⁴ and his men were Devadatta's followers. The wise merchant's men were the followers of the Buddha, and I myself was that wise merchant."

Serivavanija Jataka

The Traders of Seriva

Jat 3

So that a disheartened bhikkhu would have no regrets in the future, the Buddha told him this story at Savatthi to encourage him to persevere. "If you give up your practice in this sublime teaching which leads to Nibbana," the Buddha told him, "you will suffer long, like the trader of Seriva who lost a golden bowl worth a hundred thousand pieces."

When asked to explain, the Buddha told this story of the distant past.

Five long aeons ago, the Bodhisatta was an honest trader selling fancy goods in the kingdom of Seriva. Sometimes he traveled with another trader from the same kingdom, a greedy fellow, who handled the same wares.

One day the two of them crossed the Telavaha river to do business in the bustling city of Andhapura. As usual, to avoid competing with each other, they divided the city between them and began selling their goods from door to door.

In that city there was a ramshackle mansion. Years before the family had been rich merchants, but by the time of this story their fortunes had dwindled to nothing, and all the men of the family had died. The sole survivors were a girl and her grandmother, and these two earned their living by working for hire.

That afternoon, while the greedy peddler was on his rounds, he came to the door of that very house, crying, "Beads for sale! Beads for sale!"

When the young girl heard his cry, she begged, "Please buy me a trinket, Grandmother."

"We're very poor, dear. There's not a cent in the house and I can't think of anything to offer in exchange."

The girl suddenly remembered an old bowl. "Look!" she cried. "Here's an old bowl. It's of no use to us. Let's try to trade it for something nice."

What the little girl showed her grandmother was an old bowl which had been used by the great merchant, the late head of the family. He had always eaten his curries served from this beautiful, expensive bowl. After his death it had been thrown among the pots and pans and forgotten. Since it hadn't been used for a very long time, it was completely covered with grime. The two women had no idea it was gold.

The old woman asked the trader to come in and sit down. She showed him the bowl and said, "Sir, my granddaughter would like a trinket. Would you be so kind as to take this bowl and give her something or other in exchange?"

The peddler took the bowl in his hand and turned it over. Suspecting its value, he scratched the back of it with a needle. After just one covert look, he knew for certain the bowl was real gold.

He sat there frowning and thinking until his greed got the better of him. At last he decided to try to get the bowl without giving the woman anything whatever for it. Pretending to be angry, he growled, "Why did you bring me this stupid bowl? It isn't worth half a cent!" He threw the bowl to the floor, got up, and stalked out of the house in apparent disgust.

Since it had been agreed between the two traders that the one might try the streets which the other had already covered, the honest peddler came later into that same street and appeared at the door of the house, crying, "Beads for sale!"

Once again the young girl made the same request of her grandmother, and the old woman replied, "My dear, the first peddler threw our bowl on the ground and stormed out of the house. What have we got left to offer?"

"Oh, but that trader was nasty, Grandmother. This one looks and sounds very kind. I think he will take it."

"All right, then. Call him in."

When the peddler came into the house, the two women gave him a seat and shyly put the bowl into his hands. Immediately recognizing that the bowl was gold, he said, "Mother, this bowl is worth a hundred thousand pieces of silver. I'm sorry but I don't have that much money."

Astonished at his words, the old woman said, "Sir, another peddler who came here a little while ago said that it was not worth half a cent. He got angry, threw it on the floor, and went away. If it wasn't valuable then, it must be because of your own

goodness that the bowl has turned into gold. Please take it, and just give us something or other for it. We will be more than satisfied."

At that time the peddler had only five hundred pieces of silver and goods worth another five hundred. He gave everything to the women, asking only to keep his scales, his bag, and eight coins for his return fare. Of course, they were happy to agree. After profuse thanks on both sides, the trader hurried to the river with the golden bowl. He gave his eight coins to the boatman and got into the boat.

Not long after he had left, the greedy peddler returned to the house, giving the impression of having reluctantly reconsidered their offer. He asked them to bring out their bowl, saying he would give them something or other for it after all.

The old woman flew at him. "You scoundrel!" she cried. "You told us that our golden bowl was not worth even half a cent. Lucky for us, an honest trader came after you left and told us it was really worth a hundred thousand pieces of silver. He gave us a thousand for it and took it away, so you are too late!"

When the peddler heard this, an intense pain swept over him. "He robbed me! He robbed me!" he cried. "He got my golden bowl worth a hundred thousand!" He became hysterical and lost all control. Throwing down his money and merchandise, he tore off his shirt, grabbed the beam of his scales for a club, and ran to the riverside to catch the other trader.

By the time he got to the river, the boat was already in midstream. He shouted for the boat to return to shore, but the honest peddler, who had already paid, calmly told the ferryman to continue on.

The frustrated trader could only stand there on the river-bank and watch his rival escape with the bowl. The sight so infuriated him that a fierce hate swelled up inside him. His heart grew hot, and blood gushed from his mouth. Finally, his heart cracked like the mud at the bottom of a pond dried up by the sun. So intense was the unreasoning hatred which he developed against the other trader because of the golden bowl, that he perished then and there.

The honest trader returned to Seriva, where he lived a full life spent in charity and other good works, and passed away to fare according to his deserts.

When the Buddha finished this story, he identified himself as the honest trader, and Devadatta as the greedy trader. This was the beginning of the implacable grudge which Devadatta held against the Bodhisatta through innumerable lives.

Matakabhatta Jataka

The Goat That Laughed and Wept

Jat 18

One day, while the Buddha was staying in Jetavana, some bhikkhus asked him if there was any benefit in sacrificing goats, sheep, and other animals as offerings for departed relatives.

"No, bhikkhus," replied the Buddha. "No good ever comes from taking life, not even when it is for the purpose of providing a Feast for the Dead." Then he told this story of the past.

Long, long ago, when Brahmadata was reigning in Baranasi, a brahman decided to offer a Feast for the Dead and bought a goat to sacrifice. "My boys," he said to his students, "take this goat down to the river, bathe it, brush it, hang a garland around its neck, give it some grain to eat, and bring it back."

"Yes, sir," they replied and led the goat to the river.

While they were grooming it, the goat started to laugh with a sound like a pot smashing. Then, just as strangely, it started to weep loudly.

The young students were amazed at this behavior. "Why did you suddenly laugh," they asked the goat, "and why do you now cry so loudly?"

"Repeat your question when we get back to your teacher," the goat answered.

The students hurriedly took the goat back to their master and told him what had happened at the river. Hearing the story, the master himself asked the goat why it had laughed and why it had wept.

"In times past, brahman," the goat began, "I was a brahman who taught the Vedas like you. I, too, sacrificed a goat as an offering for a Feast for the Dead. Because of killing that single goat, I have had my head cut off 499 times. I laughed aloud when I realized that this is my last birth as an animal to be sacrificed. Today I will be freed from my misery. On the other hand, I cried when I realized that, because of killing me, you, too, may be doomed to lose your head five hundred times. It was out of pity for you that I cried."

"Well, goat," said the brahman, "in that case, I am not going to kill you."

"Brahman!" exclaimed the goat. "Whether or not you kill me, I cannot escape death today."

"Don't worry," the brahman assured the goat. "I will guard you."

"You don't understand," the goat told him. "Your protection is weak. The force of my evil deed is very strong."

The brahman untied the goat and said to his students, "Don't allow anyone to harm this goat." They obediently followed the animal to protect it.

After the goat was freed, it began to graze. It stretched out its neck to reach the leaves on a bush growing near the top of a large rock. At that very instant a lightning bolt hit the rock, breaking off a sharp piece of stone which flew through the air and neatly cut off the goat's head. A crowd of people gathered around the dead goat and began to talk excitedly about the amazing accident.

A tree deva had observed everything from the goat's purchase to its dramatic death, and drawing a lesson from the incident, admonished the crowd: "If people only knew that the penalty would be rebirth into sorrow, they would cease from taking life. A horrible doom awaits one who slays." With this explanation of the law of kamma the deva instilled in his listeners the fear of hell. The people were so frightened that they completely gave up the practice of animal sacrifices. The deva further instructed the people in the Precepts and urged them to do good.

Eventually, that deva passed away to fare according to his deserts. For several generations after that, people remained faithful to the Precepts and spent their lives in charity and meritorious works, so that many were reborn in the heavens.

The Buddha ended his lesson and identified the Birth by saying, "In those days I was that deva."

Kuhaka Jataka

The Straw Worth More Than Gold

Jat 89

The Buddha told this story at Jetavana about a conniving bhikkhu, who was the source of much trouble to other bhikkhus.

Long, long ago, when Brahmadatta was reigning in Baranasi, a shifty ascetic with long, matted hair, lived near a certain little village. The landowner had built a modest hermitage in the forest for him, and daily provided him with excellent food in his own house.

The landowner had a great fear of robbers and decided that the safest course to protect his money was to hide it in an unlikely place. Believing the matted-haired ascetic to be a model of sainthood, he brought a hundred pieces of gold to the hermitage, buried them there, and asked the ascetic to keep watch over the treasure.

"There's no need to say more, sir, to a man like me who has renounced the world. We hermits never covet what belongs to others."

"That's wonderful," said the landowner, who went off with complete confidence in the hermit's protestations.

As soon as the landowner was out of sight, the ascetic chuckled to himself, "Why, there's enough here to last a man his whole life!"

Allowing a few days to elapse, the hermit dug up the gold and reburied it conveniently by the road. The following morning, after a meal of rice and succulent curries at the landowner's house, the ascetic said, "My good sir, I've been staying here, supported by you, for a long time. Frankly, living so long in one place is like living in the world, which is forbidden to ascetics like me. I really cannot remain here any longer; the time has come for me to leave."

The landowner urged him to stay, but nothing could overcome the hermit's determination.

"Well, then," said the landowner, "if you must go, good luck to you." Reluctantly, he escorted the ascetic to the outskirts of the village and returned home.

After walking a short way by himself, the ascetic thought it would be a good thing to cajole the landowner. Sticking a straw in his matted hair, he hurried back to the village.

"What brings you back again?" asked the surprised landowner.

"I just noticed that a straw from your roof got stuck in my hair. We hermits must not take anything which has not been given to us, so I have brought it back to you."

"Throw it down, sir, and go your way," said the landowner. "Imagine!" he said to himself. "This ascetic is so honest he won't even take a straw which does not belong to him. What a rare person!" Thus, greatly impressed by the ascetic's honesty, the landowner bid him farewell again.

At that time the Bodhisatta, reborn as a merchant, was traveling to the border on business and happened to stop at that same little village, where he witnessed the ascetic's return with the piece of straw. Suspicion grew in his mind that the hermit must have robbed the landowner of something. He asked the rich man whether he had deposited anything in the ascetic's care.

"Yes," the landowner answered rather hesitantly, "a hundred pieces of gold."

"Well, why don't you just go and see if it's still safe?" the merchant suggested.

The landowner went to the deserted hermitage, dug where he had left his money, and found it gone. Rushing back to the merchant, he cried, "It's not there!"

"The thief is certainly that long-haired rascal of an ascetic," said the merchant. "Let's catch him."

The two men ran after the rogue and quickly caught him. They kicked him and beat him until he showed them where he had hidden the gold. After they had gotten back the money, the merchant looked at the coins and scornfully asked the ascetic, "Why

didn't this hundred pieces of gold trouble your conscience as much as that straw? Take care, you hypocrite, never to play such a trick again!"

When his life ended, the merchant passed away to fare according to his deserts.

When he had ended his lesson, the Buddha said, "Thus you see, monks, that this monk was as conniving in the past as he is today." Then he identified the Birth by saying, "This monk was the scheming ascetic of those days, and I was the wise and good merchant."

Notes

1. The Uposatha is the full, new, and half-moon days, when many Buddhists observe the Eight Precepts.
2. Yojana: a unit of distance, about seven miles.
3. The Realm of Brahma refers to the highest heavens, where beings enjoy radiant bliss.
4. Devadatta was a cousin of the Buddha. He tried to kill the Master several times, but always failed. See Jataka No.3, immediately below.
5. Devas are celestial beings, ranging from the highest gods to simple tree spirits.