Ja 137 — Babbu Jātaka

English translation by Robert Chalmers.

Source: https://raw.githubusercontent.com/suttacentral/sc-data/2d9ca8da858f94302ed6783e2717bf73d651881b/html_text/en/pli/sutta/kn/ja/vol1/ja137.html

Source revision: 2d9ca8da858f94302ed6783e2717bf73d651881b

License: Public Domain (original English edition, published 1895–1907)

Edited by E. B. Cowell

Original edition: Cambridge University Press, volume 1, 1895

Pinned source revision: https://github.com/suttacentral/sc-data/commit/2d9ca8da858f94302ed6783e2717bf73d651881b

Scope: Complete numbered source article from the traditional Jātaka commentary; canonical verses appear in story context. This is not a verse-only edition.

Changes: Converted the pinned SuttaCentral HTML article to plain text; removed inline print page-reference labels and normalized whitespace. The original source retains references.

Text

“Give food to one cat.”—This story was told by the Master while at Jetavana, about the precept respecting Kana’s mother. She was a lay-sister at Savatthi known only as Kana’s mother, who had entered the Paths of Salvation and was of the Elect. Her daughter Kana was married to a husband of the same caste in another village, and some errand or other made her go to see her mother. A few days went by, and her husband sent a messenger to say he wished her to come back. The girl asked her mother whether she should go, and the mother said she could not go back empty-handed after so long an absence, and set about making a cake. Just then up came a Brother going his round for alms, and the mother sat him down to the cake she had just baked. Away he went and told another Brother, who came up just in time to get the second cake that was baked for the daughter to take home with her. He told a third, and the third told a fourth, and so each fresh cake was taken by a fresh comer. The result of this was that the daughter did not start on her way home, and the husband sent a second and a third messenger after her. And the message he sent by the third was that if his wife did not come back, he should get another wife. And each message had exactly the same result. So the husband took another wife, and at the news his former wife fell a-weeping. Knowing all this, the Master put on his robes early in the morning and went with his alms-bowl to the house of Kana’s mother and sat down on the seat set for him. Then he asked why the daughter was crying, and, being told, spoke words of consolation to the mother, and arose and went back to the Monastery.

Now the Brethren came to know how Kana had been stopped three times from going back to her husband owing to the action of the four Brothers; and one day they met in the Hall of Truth and began to talk about the matter. The Master came into the Hall and asked what they were discussing, and they told him. “Brethren,” said he, “think not this is the first time those four Brothers have brought sorrow on Kana’s mother by eating of her store; they did the like in days gone by too.” So saying he told this story of the past.

Once on a time when Brahmadatta was reigning in. Benares, the Bodhisatta was born a stone-cutter, and growing up became expert in working stones. Now in the Kasi country there dwelt a very rich merchant who had amassed forty crores in gold. And when his wife died, so strong was her love of money that she was re-born a mouse and dwelt over the treasure. And one by one the whole family died, including the merchant himself. Likewise the village became deserted and forlorn. At the time of our story the Bodhisatta was quarrying and shaping stones on the site of this deserted village; and the mouse used often to see him as she ran about to find food. At last she fell in love with him; and, bethinking her how the secret of all her vast wealth would die with her, she conceived the idea of enjoying it with him. So one day she came to the Bodhisatta with a coin in her mouth. Seeing this, he spoke to her kindly, and said, "Mother, what has brought you here with this coin?" "It is for you to lay out for yourself, and to buy meat with for me as well, my son." Nowise loth, he took the money and spent a halfpenny of it on meat which he brought to the mouse, who departed and ate to her heart's content. And this went on, the mouse giving the Bodhisatta a coin every day, and he in return supplying her with meat. But it fell out one day that the mouse was caught by a cat.

"Don't kill me," said the mouse.

"Why not?" said the cat. "I'm as hungry as can be, and really must kill you to allay the pangs."

"First, tell me whether you're always hungry, or only hungry today."

"Oh, every day finds me hungry again."

"Well then, if this be so, I will find you always in meat; only let me go."

"Mind you do then," said the cat, and let the mouse go.

As a consequence of this the mouse had to divide the supplies of meat she got from the Bodhisatta into two portions and gave one half to the cat, keeping the other for herself.

Now, as luck would have it, the same mouse was caught another day by a second cat and had to purchase her release on the same terms. So now the daily food was divided into three portions. And when a third cat caught the mouse and a like arrangement had to be made, the supply was divided into four portions. And later a fourth cat caught her, and the food had to be divided among five, so that the mouse, reduced to such short commons, grew so thin as to be nothing but skin and bone. Remarking how emaciated his friend was getting, the Bodhisatta asked the reason. Then the mouse told him all that had befallen her.

"Why didn't you tell me all this before?" said, the Bodhisatta. "Cheer up, I'll help you out of your troubles." So he took a block of the purest crystal and scooped out a cavity in it and made the mouse get inside. "Now stop there," said he, "and don't fail to fiercely threaten and revile all who come near."

So the mouse crept into the crystal cell and waited. Up came one of the cats and demanded his meat. “Away, vile grimalkin,” said the mouse; “why should I supply you? go home and eat your kittens!” Infuriated at these words, and never suspecting the mouse to be inside the crystal, the cat sprang at the mouse to eat her up; and so furious was its spring that it broke the walls of its chest and its eyes started from its head. So that cat died and its carcase tumbled down out of sight. And the like fate in turn befell all four cats. And ever after the grateful mouse brought the Bodhisatta two or three coins instead of one as before, and by degrees she thus gave him the whole of the hoard. In unbroken friendship the two lived together, till their lives ended and they passed away to fare according to their deserts.

The story told, the boaster, as Buddha, uttered this stanza—

Give food to one cat, Number Two appears:

A third and fourth succeed in fruitful line;

—Witness the four that by the crystal died.

His lesson ended, the Master identified the Birth by saying, “These four Brethren were the four cats of those days, Kana’s mother was the mouse, and I the stone-cutter.”

The Jātaka, or Stories of the Buddha’s Former Births, edited by E.B. Cowell, published by The Cambridge University Press.

Vol. 1, translated by Robert Chalmers, 1895.

Vol. 2, translated by W.H.D. Rouse, 1895.

Vol. 3, translated by H.T. Francis and R.A. Neil, 1897.

Vol. 4, translated by W.H.D. Rouse, 1901.

Vol. 5, translated by H.T. Francis, 1905.

Vol. 6, translated by E.B. Cowell and W.H.D. Rouse, 1907.

These translations are in the public domain. You are free to do whatever you like with them.

Scanned, proofed and formatted at sacred-texts.com, January 2006–February 2010, by John Bruno Hare and others. Thanks to the Sacred Texts Archive for making these texts available in digital form.

Prepared for SuttaCentral by Bhikkhu Sujato.