# Ja 340 — Visayha Jātaka

English translation by H. T. Francis and R. A. Neil.

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Edited by E. B. Cowell

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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

“Of old, Visayha,” etc.—This story was told by the Master while at Jetavana of Anathapindika. The incident that gave rise to the story has been already told in full in the Khadirangara Birth. On this occasion the Master addressing Anathapindika said, “Wise men of old, my lay brother, gave alms, rejecting the counsel of Sakka, king of heaven, when he stood in mid-air and tried to prevent them, saying, “Give not alms.” And at his request the Master told a story of the past.

Once upon a time when Brahmadatta was reigning in Benares, the Bodhisatta became a great merchant, named Visayha, worth eighty crores. And being endowed with the Five Virtues, he was liberal and fond of almsgiving. He had alms-halls built at the four city gates, in the heart of the city, and at the door of his own house. At these six points he set on foot almsgiving, and every day six hundred thousand men went forth to beg, and the food of the Bodhisatta and that of the beggars was exactly the same.

And as he thus stirred up the people of all India by his gifts, the abode of Sakka was shaken by the extraordinary efficacy of his charity, and the yellow marble throne of the king of heaven showed signs of heat. Sakka exclaimed, “Who, I wonder, would make me fall from my seat in heaven?” And looking about him he espied the great merchant and thought to himself, “This Visayha gives alms and by scattering his gifts everywhere is stirring up all India. By means of his almsgiving, methinks, he will dethrone me and himself become Sakka. I will destroy his wealth and make him a poor man, and so bring it about that he shall no longer give alms.” So Sakka caused his oil, honey, molasses, and the like, even all his treasure of grain to vanish, as well as his slaves and work people. Those who were deprived of his gifts came and said, “My lord, the alms-hall has disappeared. We do not find anything in the various places set up by you.” “Take money hence,” he said. “Do not cut off the giving of alms.” And calling his wife, he bade her keep up her charity. She searched the whole house, and not finding a single piece of money, she said, “My lord, except the clothes we wear, I see nothing. The whole house is empty.” Opening the seven jewel

treasuries they found nothing, and save the merchant and his wife no one else was seen, neither slaves nor hirelings. The Bodhisatta again addressing his wife said, “My dear, we cannot possibly cut off our charities. Search the whole house till you find something.”

At that moment a certain grass-mower threw down his sickle and pole and the rope for binding the grass in the doorway, and ran away. The merchant’s wife found them and said, “My lord, this is all I see,” and brought and gave them to him. Said the Bodhisatta, “My dear, all these years I have never mown grass before, but to-day I will mow grass and take and sell it, and by this means dispense the fitting alms.” So through fear of having to cut off his charities, he took the sickle and the pole and the rope, and going forth from the city came to a place of much grass, and mowing it tied it up in two bundles, saying, “One shall belong to us, and with the other I will give alms.” And hanging the grass on the pole he took it and went and sold it at the city gate, and receiving two small coins he gave half the money to the beggars. Now there were many beggars, and as they repeatedly cried out, “Give to us also,” he gave the other half of the money also, and passed the day with his wife fasting. In this way six days passed, and on the seventh day, while he was gathering the grass, as he was naturally delicate and had been fasting for seven days, no sooner did the heat of the sun strike upon his forehead, than his eyes began to swim in his head, and he became unconscious and fell down, scattering the grass. Sakka was moving about, observing what Visayha did. And at that instant the god came, and standing in the air uttered the first stanza:

Of old, Visayha, thou didst alms bestow

And to almsgiving loss of wealth dost owe.

Henceforth show self-restraint, refuse to give,

And thou midst lasting joys for aye shalt live.

The Bodhisatta on hearing his words asked, “Who art thou?” “I am Sakka,” he said. The Bodhisatta replied, “Sakka himself by giving alms and taking upon him the moral duties, and keeping fast days and fulfilling the seven vows attained the office of Sakka. But now thou forbiddest the almsgiving that brought about thy own greatness. Truly thou art guilty of an unworthy deed.” And so saying, he repeated three stanzas:

It is not right, men say, that deed of shame

Should stain the honour of a noble name.

O thou that dost a thousand eyes possess

Guard us from this, e’en in our sore distress.

Let not our wealth in faithless wise be spent

On our own pleasure or aggrandisement,

But as of old our stores with increase bless.

By that same road a former chariot went

A second may well go. So will we give

As long as we have wherewithal to live,

Nor at the worst each generous thought repress.

Sakka being unable to stop him from his purpose asked him why he gave alms. “Desiring,” he said, “neither Sakkahood nor Brahmaship, but seeking omniscience do I give.” Sakka in token of his delight on hearing these words patted him on the back with his hands. At the very instant the Bodhisatta enjoyed this favour, his whole frame was filled with joy. By the supernatural power of Sakka all manner of prosperity was restored to him. “Great merchant,” said Sakka, “henceforth do thou every day give alms, distributing twelve hundred thousand portions.” And creating countless wealth in his house, Sakka took leave of him and returned straight to his own place of abode.

The Master, having ended his lesson, thus identified the Birth: “At that time the mother of Rahula was the merchant’s wife, and I myself was Visayha.”

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.

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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.

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