Ja 35 — Vattaka Jātaka

English translation by Robert Chalmers.

Source: https://raw.githubusercontent.com/suttacentral/sc-data/2d9ca8da858f94302ed6783e2717bf73d651881b/html_text/en/pli/sutta/kn/ja/vol1/ja35.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

“With, wings that fly not.”—This story was told by the Master, whilst on an alms-pilgrimage through Magadha, about the going-out of a jungle fire. Once the Master, whilst on an alms-pilgrimage through Magadha, went on his morning round for alms through a certain hamlet in that country; on his return, after his meal, he went out again followed by the company of the Brethren. Just then a great fire broke out. There were numbers of Brethren both in front of the Master and behind him. On came the fire, spreading far and wide, till all was one sheet of smoke and flame. Hereupon, some unconverted Brethren were seized with the fear of death. “Let us make a counter fire,” they cried; “and then the big fire will not sweep over the ground we have fired.” And, with this view, they set about kindling a fire with their tinder-sticks.

But others said, “What is this you do, Brethren? You are like such as mark not the moon in mid-heaven, or the sun’s orb rising with myriad rays from the east, or the sea on whose shores they stand, or Mount Sineru towering before their very eyes,—when, as you journey along in the company of him who is peerless among devas and men alike, you give not a thought to the All-Enlightened Buddha, but cry out, ‘Let us make a fire!’ You know not the might of a Buddha! Come, let us go to the Master.” Then, gathering together from front and rear alike, the Brethren in a body flocked round the Lord of Wisdom. At a certain spot the Master halted, with this mighty assembly of the Brethren surrounding him. On rolled the flames, roaring as though to devour them. But when they approached the spot where the Buddha had taken his stand, they came no nearer than sixteen lengths, but there and then went out,—even as a torch plunged into water. It had no power to spread over a space thirty-two lengths in diameter.

The Brethren burst into praises of the Master, saying, “Oh! how great are the virtues of a Buddha! For, even this fire, though lacking sense, could not sweep over the spot where a Buddha stood, but went out like a torch in water. Oh! how marvellous are the powers of a Buddha!”

Hearing their words, the Master said, “It is no present power of mine, Brethren, that makes this fire go out on reaching this spot of ground. It is the power of a former ‘Act of Truth’ of mine. For in this spot no fire will burn throughout the whole of this aeon, the miracle being one which endures for an aeon.”

Then the Elder Ananda folded a robe into four and spread it for the Master to sit on. The Master took his seat. Bowing to the Buddha as he sat cross-legged there, the Brethren too seated themselves around him. Then they asked him, saying, “Only the present is known to us, sir; the past is hidden from us. Make it known to us.” And, at their request, he told this story of the past.

Once upon a time in this selfsame spot in Magadha, it was as a quail that the Bodhisatta came to life once more. Breaking his way out of the shell of the egg in which he was born, he became a young quail, about as big as a large ball. And his parents kept him lying in the nest, while they fed him with food which they brought in their beaks. In himself, he had not the strength either to spread his wings and fly through the air, or to lift his feet and walk upon the ground. Year after year that spot was always ravaged by a jungle-fire; and it was just at this time that the flames swept down on it with a mighty roaring. The flocks of birds, darting from their several nests, were seized with the fear of death, and flew shrieking away. The father and mother of the Bodhisatta were as frightened as the others and flew away, forsaking the Bodhisatta. Lying there in the nest, the Bodhisatta stretched forth his neck, and seeing the flames spreading towards him, he thought to himself, “Had I the power to put forth my wings and fly, I would wing my way hence to safety; or, if I could move my legs and walk, I could escape elsewhere afoot. Moreover, my parents, seized with the fear of death, are fled away to save themselves, leaving me here quite alone in the world. I am without protector or helper. What, then, shall I do this day?”

Then this thought came to him—“In this world there exists what is termed the Efficacy of Goodness, and what is termed the Efficacy of Truth. There are those who, through their having realised the Perfections in past ages, have attained beneath the Bo-tree to be All-Enlightened; who, having won Release by goodness, tranquillity and wisdom, possess also discernment of the knowledge of such Release; who are filled with truth, compassion, mercy, and patience; whose love embraces all creatures alike; whom men call omniscient Buddhas. There is an efficacy in the attributes they have won. And I too grasp one truth; I hold and believe in a single principle in Nature. Therefore, it behoves me to call to mind the Buddhas of the past, and the Efficacy they have won, and to lay hold of the true belief that is in me touching the principle of Nature; and by an Act of Truth to make the flames go back, to the saving both of myself and of the rest of the birds.”

Therefore it has been said—

There’s saving grace in Goodness in this world;

There’s truth, compassion, purity of life.

Thereby, I’ll work a matchless Act of Truth.

Remembering Faith's might, and taking thought

On those who triumphed in the days gone by,

Strong in the truth, an Act of Truth I wrought.

Accordingly, the Bodhisatta, calling to mind the efficacy of the Buddhas long since past away, performed an Act of Truth in the name of the true faith that was in him, repeating this stanza—

With wings that fly not, feet that walk not yet,

Forsaken by my parents, here I lie!

Wherefore I conjure thee, dread Lord of Fire,

Primaeval Jataveda, turn! go back!

Even as he performed his Act of Truth, Jataveda went back a space of sixteen lengths; and in going back the flames did not pass away to the forest devouring everything in their path. No; they went out there and then, like a torch plunged in water. Therefore it has been said—

I wrought my Act of Truth, and therewithal

The sheet of blazing fire left sixteen lengths

Unscathed,—like flames by water met and quenched.

And as that spot escaped being wasted by fire throughout a whole aeon, the miracle is called an 'aeon-miracle.' When his life closed, the Bodhisatta, who had performed this Act of Truth, passed away to fare according to his deserts.

"Thus, Brethren," said the Master, "it is not my present power but the efficacy of an Act of Truth performed by me when a young quail, that has made the flames pass over this spot iii the jungle." His lesson ended, he preached the Truths, at the close whereof some won the First, some the Second, some the Third Path, while others again became Arahats. Also, the Master shewed the connexion and identified the Birth by saying, "My present parents were the parents of those days, and I myself the king of the quails."

For the archaic title of Jataveda here given to Fire, compare Jataka, No. 75, as to a similar use of the archaic name Pajjunna.]

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.