Ja 421 — Gangamala 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

“The earth’s like coals,” etc.—The Master told this tale while dwelling in Jetavana, concerning the keeping of the weekly holy days. One day the Master was addressing the lay-brethren who were keeping the holy days and said, “Lay-brethren, your conduct is good; when men keep the holy days they should give alms, keep the moral precepts, never show anger, feel kindness and do the duties of the day: wise men of old gained great glory from even a partial keeping of the holy days: “ and at their request he told the tale of old.

Once upon a time when Brahmadatta was reigning in Benares, there was a rich merchant in that city named Suciparivara, whose wealth reached eighty crores and who took delight in charity and other good works. His wife and children and all his household and servants down to the calf-herds kept six holy days every month. At that time the Bodhisatta was born in a certain poor family and lived a hard life on workman’s wages. Hoping to get work he came to Suciparivara’s house: saluting and sitting on one side, he was asked his errand and said, “It was to get work for wages in your house. “ When other workmen came to him, the merchant used to say to them, “In this house the workmen keep the moral precepts, if you can keep them you may work for me:” but to the Bodhisatta he made no hint in the way of mentioning moral precepts but said, “ Very well, my good man, you can work for me and arrange about your wages.” Thenceforth the Bodhisatta did all the merchant’s work meekly and heartily, without a thought of his own weariness; he went early to work and came back at evening. One day they proclaimed a festival in the city. The merchant said to a female servant, “This is a holy day: you must cook some rice for the workpeople in the morning: they will eat it early and fast the rest of the day.” The Bodhisatta rose early and went to his work: no one had told him to fast that day. The other workpeople ate in the morning and then fasted: the merchant with his wife, children and attendants kept the fast: all went, each to his own abode, and sat there meditating on the moral precepts. The Bodhisatta worked all day and came home at sunset. The cook-maid gave him water for his hands, and offered him in a dish rice taken from the boiler. The Bodhisatta said, “At this hour there is a great noise on ordinary days: where have they all gone to-day?” “They are

all keeping the fast, each in his own abode." He thought, "I will not be the only person misconducting himself among so many people of moral conduct:" so he went and asked the merchant if the fast could be kept at all by undertaking the duties of the day at that hour. He told him that the whole duty could not be done, because it had not been undertaken in the morning; but half the duty could be done. "So far be it," he answered, and undertaking the duty in his master's presence he began to keep the fast, and going to his own abode he lay meditating on the precepts. He had taken no food all day, and in the last watch he felt pain like a spear-wound. The merchant brought him various remedies and told him to eat them: but he said, "I will not break my fast: I have undertaken it though it cost my life." The pain became intense and at sunrise he was losing consciousness. They told him he was dying, and taking him out they set him in a place of retirement. At this moment the king of Benares in a noble chariot with a great retinue bad reached that spot in a progress round the city. The Bodhisatta, seeing the royal splendour, felt a desire for royalty and prayed for it. Dying, he was conceived again, in consequence of keeping half the fast-day, in the womb of the chief queen. She went through the ceremony of pregnancy, and bore a son after ten months. He was named prince Udaya. When he grew up he became perfect in all sciences: by his memory of previous births he knew his former action of merit, and thinking it was a great reward for a little action he sang the song of ecstasy again and again. At his father's death he gained the kingdom, and observing his own great glory he sang the same song of ecstasy. One day they made ready for a festival in the city. A great multitude were intent on amusement. A certain water-carrier who lived by the north gate of Benares had hid a half-penny in a brick in a boundary wall. He cohabited with a poor woman who also made her living by carrying water. She said to him, "My lord, there is a festival in the town: if you have any money, let us enjoy ourselves." "I have, dear." "How much?" "A half-penny." "Where is it?" "In a brick by the north gate, twelve leagues from here I leave my treasure: but have you got anything in hand?" "I have." "How much?" "A half-penny." "So yours and mine together make a whole penny: we'll buy a garland with one part of it, perfume with another, and strong drink with a third: go and fetch your half-penny from where you put it." He was delighted to catch the idea suggested by his wife's words, and saying, "Don't trouble, dear, I will fetch it," he set out. The man was as strong as an elephant: he went more than six leagues, and though it was mid-day and he was treading on sand as hot as if it were strewn with coals just off the flame, he was delighted with the desire of gain and in old yellow clothes with a palm-leaf fastened in his ear he went by the palace court in pursuit of his purpose, singing a song. King Udaya stood at an open window, and seeing him coming wondered who it was, who disregarding such wind and heat went singing for joy, and sent a servant to call him up. "The king calls for you," he was told: but he said, "What is the king to me? I don't know the king." He was taken by force and stood on one side. Then the king spoke two stanzas in enquiry—

The earth's like coals, the ground like embers hot:

You sing your song, the great heat burns you not.

The sun on high, the sand below are hot:

You sing your song, the great heat burns you not.

Hearing the king's words he spoke the third stanza—

'Tis these desires that burn, and not the sun:

'Tis all these pressing tasks that must be done.

The king asked what his business was. He answered, "O king, I was living by the south gate with a poor woman: she proposed that she and I should amuse ourselves at the festival and asked if I had anything in hand: I told her I had a treasure stored inside a wall by the north gate: she sent me for it to help us to amuse ourselves: those words of hers never leave my heart and as I think of them hot desire burns me: that is my business." "Then what delights you so much that you disregard wind and sun, and sing as you go?" "O king, I sing to think that when I fetch my treasure I shall amuse myself along with her." "Then, my good man, is your treasure, hidden by the north gate, a hundred thousand pieces?" "Oh no." Then the king asked in succession if it were fifty thousand, forty, thirty, twenty, ten, five, four, three, two gold pieces, one piece, half a piece, a quarter piece, four pence, three, two, one penny. The man said "No" to all these questions and then, "It is a half-penny: indeed, O king, that is all my treasure: but I am going in hopes of fetching it and then amusing myself with her: and in that desire and delight the wind and sun do not annoy me." The king said, "My good man, don't go there in such a heat: I will give you a half-penny." "O king, I will take you at your word and accept it, but I won't lose the other: I won't give up going there and fetching it too." "My good man, stay here: I'll give you a penny, two pence:" then offering more and more he went on to a crore, a hundred crores, boundless wealth, if the man would stay. But he always answered, "O king, I'll take it, but I'll fetch the other too." Then he was tempted by offers of posts as treasurer and posts of various kinds and the position of viceroy: at last he was offered half the kingdom if he would stay. Then he consented. The king said to his ministers, "Go, have my friend shaved and bathed and adorned, and bring him back." They did so. The king divided his kingdom in two and gave him half: but they say that he took the northern half from love of his half-penny. He was called king Half-penny. They ruled the kingdom in friendship and harmony. One day they went to the park together. After amusing themselves, king Udaya lay down with his head in king Half-penny's lap. He fell asleep, while the attendants were going here and there enjoying their amusements. King Half-penny thought, "Why should I always have only half the kingdom? I will kill him and be sole king:" so he drew his sword, but thinking to strike him remembered that the king had made him, when poor and mean, his partner and set him in great power, and that the thought which had risen in his mind to kill such a benefactor was a wicked one: so he sheathed the sword. A second and a third time the same thought rose. Feeling that this thought, rising again and again, would lead him on to the evil deed, he threw the sword on the ground and woke the king. "Pardon me, O king," he said and fell at his feet. "Friend, you have done me no wrong." "I have, O great king: I did such and such a thing." "Then, friend, I pardon you: if you desire it, be sole king, and I will serve under you as viceroy." He answered, "O king, I have no need of the kingdom, such a desire will cause me to be reborn in evil states: the kingdom is yours, take it: I will become an ascetic: I have seen the root of desire, it grows from a man's wish, from henceforth I will have no such wish," and so in ecstasy he spoke the fourth stanza—

I have seen thy roots, Desire: in a man's own will they lie.

I will no more wish for thee, and thou, Desire, shalt die.

So saying, he spoke the fifth stanza declaring the law unto a great multitude devoted to desires—

Little desire is not enough, and much but brings us pain:

Ah! foolish men: be sober, friends, if ye would wisdom gain.

So declaring the law unto the multitude, he entrusted the realm to king Udaya: leaving the weeping multitude with tears on their faces, he went to the Himalaya, became an ascetic and reached perfect insight. At the time of his becoming an ascetic, king Udaya spoke the sixth stanza in complete expression of ecstasy—

Little desire has brought me all the fruit,

Great is the glory Udaya acquires;

Mighty the gain if one is resolute

To be a Brother and forsake desires.

No one knew the meaning of this stanza. One day the chief queen asked him the meaning of it. The king would not tell. There was a certain court-barber, called Gangamala, who when attending to the king used to use the razor first, and then grasp the hairs with his tweezers. The king liked the first operation, but the second gave him pain: at the first he would have given the barber a boon, at the second he would have cut his head off. One day he told the queen about it, saying that their court-barber was a fool: when she asked what he ought to do, he answered, "Use the tweezers first and the razor afterwards." She sent for the barber and said, "My good man, when you are trimming the king's beard you ought to take his hairs with your tweezers first and use the razor afterwards: then if the king offers you a boon, you must say you don't want anything else, but wish to know the meaning of his song: if you do, I will give you much money." He agreed. On the next day when he was trimming the king's beard, he took the tweezers first. The king said, "Gangamala, is this a new fashion of yours?" "O king," he answered, "barbers have got a new fashion;" and he grasped the king's hair with the tweezer first, using the razor afterwards. The king offered him a boon. "O king, I do not want anything else; tell me the meaning of your song." The king was ashamed to tell what his occupation had been in his days of poverty, and said, "My good man, what is the use of such a boon to you? Choose something else:" but the barber begged for it. The king feared to break his word and agreed. As described in the Kummasapinda Birth he made all arrangements and seated on a jewelled throne, told the whole story of his former act of merit in his last existence in that city. " That explains," he said, "half the stanza: for the rest, my comrade became an ascetic: I in my pride am sole king now , and that explains the second half of my song of ecstasy."

Hearing him the barber thought, “So the king got this glory for keeping half a fast day: virtue is the right course: what if I were to become an ascetic and work out my own salvation?” He left all his relatives and worldly goods, gained the king’s permission to become religious and going to the Himalaya he became an ascetic, realised the three qualities of mundane things, gained perfect insight, and became a paccekabuddha. He had a bowl and robes made by supernatural power. After spending five or six years on the mountain Gangamala he wished to see the king of Benares, and passing through the air to the royal park there, he sat on the royal stone seat. The park-keeper told the king that Gangamala, now a paccekabuddha, had come through the air and was sitting in the park. The king went at once to salute the paccekabuddha: and the queen-mother went out with her son. The king entered the park, saluted him and sat on one side with his retinue. The paccekabuddha spoke to him in a friendly manner, “Brahmadatta” (calling him by the name of the family), “are you diligent, ruling the kingdom righteously, doing charitable and other good works?” The queen-mother was angry. “This low-caste shampooing son of a barber does not know his place: he calls my kingly high-descended son Brahmadatta,” and she spoke the seventh stanza—

Penance forsooth makes men forsake their sins,

Their barber’s, potter’s, stations every one:

Through penance Gangamala glory wins,

And “Brahmadatta” now he calls my son.

The king checked his mother and declaring the qualities of the paccekabuddha, he spoke the eighth stanza—

Lo! how, e’er his death befall,

Meekness brings a man its fruit!

One who bowed before us all,

Kings and lords must now salute.

Though the king checked his mother, the rest of the multitude rose up and said, “It is not decent that such a low-caste person should speak to you by name in that way.” The king rebuked the multitude, and spoke the last stanza to declare the virtues of the paccekabuddha—

Scorn not Gangamala so,

Perfect in religion’s ways:

He has crossed the waves of woe,

Free from sorrow now he strays.

So saying the king saluted the paccekabuddha and asked him to forgive the queen-mother. The paccekabuddha did so and the king's retinue also gained his forgiveness. The king wished him to promise that he would stay in the neighbourhood: but he refused, and standing in the air before the eyes of the whole court he admonished the king and went away to Gandhamadana

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After the lesson the Master said, "Lay-brethren, you see how keeping the fast is proper to be done," and he identified the Birth: "At that time the paccekabuddha entered into nirvana, king Half-penny was Ananda, the chief queen was the mother of Rahula, king Udaya was myself."

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