Ja 425 — Atthana Jātaka

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

Source: https://raw.githubusercontent.com/suttacentral/sc-data/2d9ca8da858f94302ed6783e2717bf73d651881b/html_text/en/pli/sutta/kn/ja/vol3/ja425.html

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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

“Make Ganges calm,” etc.—The Master told this tale while dwelling in Jetavana, concerning a backsliding Brother. The Master asked him, “Is the story true, Brother, that you are backsliding?” “Yes, lord.” “What is the cause?” “The power of desire.” “Brother, womankind are ungrateful, treacherous, untrustworthy: of old wise men could not satisfy a woman, even by giving her a thousand pieces a day: and one day when she did not get the thousand pieces she had them taken by the neck and cast out: so ungrateful are womankind: do not fall into the power of desire for such a cause,” and so he told an old tale.

Once upon a time when Brahmadatta was reigning in Benares, his son, young Brahmadatta, and young Mahadhana, son of a rich merchant of Benares, were comrades and playfellows, and were educated in the same teacher’s house. The prince became king at his father’s death: and the merchant’s son abode near him. There was in Benares a certain courtesan, beautiful and prosperous. The merchant’s son gave her a thousand pieces daily, and took pleasure with her constantly: at his father’s death he succeeded to the rich merchant’s position, and did not forsake her, still giving her a thousand pieces daily. Three times a day he went to wait upon the king. One day he went to wait upon him in the evening. As he was talking with the king, the sun set, and it became dark. As he left the palace, he thought, “There is no time to go home and come back again: I will go straight to the courtesan’s house:” so he dismissed his attendants, and entered her house alone. When she saw him, she asked if he had brought the thousand pieces. “Dear, I was very late to-day; so I sent away my attendants without going home, and have come alone; but to-morrow I will give you two thousand pieces.” She thought, “If I admit him to-day, he will come empty-handed on other days, and so my wealth will be lost: I won’t admit him this time.” So she said, “Sir, I am but a courtesan: I do not give my favours without a thousand pieces: you must bring the sum.” “Dear, I will bring twice the sum to-morrow,” and so he begged her again and again. The courtesan gave orders to her maids, “Don’t let that man stand there and look at me: take him by the neck, and cast him out, and then

shut the door." They did so. He thought, "I have spent on her eighty crores of money; yet on the one day when I come empty-handed, she has me seized by the neck and cast out: Oh, womankind are wicked, shameless, ungrateful, treacherous:" and so he pondered and pondered on the bad qualities of womankind, till he felt dislike and disgust, and became discontented with a layman's life. "Why should I lead a layman's life? I will go this day and become an ascetic," he thought: so without going back to his house or seeing the king again, he left the city and entered the forest: he made a hermitage on the Ganges bank, and there made his abode as an ascetic, reaching the Perfection of Meditation, and living on wild roots and fruits.

The king missed his friend and asked for him. The courtesan's conduct had become known throughout the city: so they told the king of the matter, adding, "O king, they say that your friend through shame did not go home, but has become an ascetic in the forest." The king summoned the courtesan, and asked if the story were true about her treatment of his friend. She confessed. "Wicked, vile woman, go quickly to where my friend is and fetch him: if you fail, your life is forfeit." She was afraid at the king's words; she mounted a chariot and drove out of the city with a great retinue; she sought for his abode and hearing of it by report, went there and saluted and prayed, "Sir, bear with the evil I did in my blindness and folly: I will never do so again." "Very well, I forgive you; I am not angry with you." "If you forgive me, mount the chariot with me: we will drive to the city, and as soon as we enter it I will give you all the money in my house.". When he heard her, he replied, "Lady, I cannot go with you now: but when something that cannot happen in this world will happen, then perhaps I may go;" and so he spoke the first stanza—

Make Ganges calm like lotus-tank, cuckoos pearl-white to see,

Make apples bear the palm-trees' fruit: perchance it then might be.

But she said again, "Come; I am going." He answered, "I will go." "When?" "At such and such a time," he said and spoke the remaining stanzas—

When woven out of tortoise-hair a triple cloth you see,

For winter wear against the cold, perchance it then may be.

When of mosquito's teeth you build a tower so skilfully,

That will not shake or totter soon, perchance it then may be.

When out of horns of hare you make a ladder skilfully,

Stairs that will climb the height of heaven, perchance it then may be.

When mice to mount those ladder-stairs and eat the moon agree,

And bring down Rahu from the sky, the thing perchance may be.

When swarms of flies devour strong drink in pitchers full and free,

And house themselves in burning coals, the thing perchance may be.

When asses get them ripe red lips and faces fair to see,

And shew their skill in song and dance, the thing perchance may be.

When crows and owls shall meet to talk in converse privily,

And woo each other, lover-like, the thing perchance may be.

When sun-shades, made of tender leaves from off the forest tree,

Are strong against the rushing rain, the thing perchance may be.

When sparrows take Himalaya in all its majesty,

And bear it in their little beaks, the thing perchance may be.

And when a boy can carry light, with all its bravery,

A ship full-rigged for distant seas, the thing perchance may be.

So the Great Being spoke these eleven stanzas to fix impossible (atthana) conditions. The courtesan, hearing him, won his forgiveness and went back to Benares. She told the matter to the king, and begged for her life, which was granted.

After the lesson, the Master said, “So, Brethren, womankind are ungrateful and treacherous”; then he declared the Truths, and identified the Birth—After the Truths, the backsliding Brother was established in the fruition of the First Path—“At that time the king was Ananda, the ascetic was myself.”

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

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

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