Ja 447 — Maha-Dhamma-Pala Jātaka

English translation by W. H. D. Rouse.

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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

“What custom is it,” etc.—This story the Master told, after his first visit (as Buddha) to Kapilapura, while he lodged in his father’s Banyan Grove, about the King his father’s refusal to believe.

At the time, they say that the great King Suddhodana, having given a meal of rice gruel at his own dwelling to the Buddha at the head of twenty thousand Brethren, during the meal talked pleasantly to him, saying, “Sir, at the time of your striving, came some deities to me, and poised in the air, said, “Your son, Prince Siddhattha, has died of starvation.” And the Master replied, “Did you believe it, great King?”—“Sir, I did not believe it! Even when the deities came hovering in the air, and told me this, I refused to believe it, saying that there was no death for my son until he had obtained Buddhahood at the foot of the bo-tree.” Said the Master, “Great King, long ago in the time of the great Dhammapala, even when a world-famed teacher said—“Your son is dead, these are his bones,” you refused to believe, answering, “In our family, they never die young”; then why should you believe now?” and at his father’s request, the Master told a tale of long ago.

Once upon a time, when Brahmadatta was King of Benares, there was in the kingdom of Kasi a village named Dhammapala, and it took that name because the family of one Dhammapala dwelt there. From his keeping the Ten Paths of Virtue this brahmin was known where he dwelt as Dhammapala, or the Lawkeeper. In his household, even the servitors gave alms, and observed virtue, and kept the holy day.

At that time the Bodhisatta came to life in that household, and to him they gave the name of Dhammapala-Kumara, or Lawkeeper the Younger. So soon as he came of age, his father gave him a thousand pieces, and sent him to study at Takkasila. Thither he went, and studied with a world-famed teacher, and became the chief pupil in a company of five hundred youths.

Just then died the eldest son of the teacher; and the teacher, surrounded by his pupils, in the midst of his kith and kin, weeping did the lad's obsequies in the cemetery. Then the teacher with his company of kinsfolk, and all his pupils, were weeping and wailing, but Dhammapala only neither wept nor wailed. When afterwards the five hundred youths had returned from the cemetery, they sat down in their teacher's presence, and said, "Ah, so fine a lad, so good, a tender child, to be cut off in his tender age and parted from father and mother!" Dhammapala replied, "Tender indeed, as you say! Well, why did he die at a tender age? 'Tis not right that children of tender age should die." Then they said to him, "Why, Sir, do you not know that such persons are but mortal?"—"I know it; but in tender years they die not; people die when they are grown old."—"Then are not all component things transitory and unreal?" "Transitory they are, it is true; but in the days of youth creatures do not die; it is only when they are grown old that they die."—"Oh, is that the custom of your family?"—"Yes, that is the custom in my family." The lads told this conversation to their teacher. He sent for Dhammapala, and asked him, "Is it true, Dhammapala, my son, that in your family they do not die young?" "Yes, teacher," said he, "it is true."

On hearing this, the teacher thought, "This is a most marvellous thing he says! I will make a journey to his father, and ask him about it; and if it be true, I will live according to his rule of right."

So when he had finished for his son all that should be done, after lapse of seven or eight days he sent for Dhammapala, and said, "My son, I am going away from home; while I am away, you are to instruct these my pupils." So saying, he procured the bones of a wild goat, washed them and scented them, and put them in a bag; then taking with him a little page-boy, he left Takkasila, and in course of time arrived at that village. There he enquired his way to Maha-dhammapala's house, and stopped at the door.

The first servant of the brahmin who saw him, whoever it was, took the sunshade from his hand, and took his shoes, and took the bag from the servant. He bade them tell the lad's father, here was the teacher of his son Dhammapala the Younger, standing at the door. "Good," said the servants, and summoned the father to him. Quickly he came to the threshold, and "Come in!" said he, leading the way into his house. Seating the visitor upon a couch, he did a host's duty by washing his feet, and so forth.

When the teacher had eaten food, and they sat down for a kindly talk together, said he, "Brahmin, your son young Dhammapala, when full of wisdom, and a perfect master of the Three Vedas and the Eighteen Accomplishments, by an unhappy chance has lost his life. All component things are transitory; grieve not for him!" The brahmin clapt his hands, and laughed loudly. "Why do you laugh, brahmin?" asked the other. "Because," said he, "it is not my son who is dead; it must be some other." "No, brahmin," was the answer, "your son is dead, and no other. Look on his bones, and believe." So saying, he unwrapt the bones. "These are your son's bones," said he."A wild goat's bones, perhaps," quoth the other, "or a dog's; but my son is not dead. In our family for seven generations no such thing has been, as a death in tender years; and you are speaking falsehood." Then they all clapt their hands, and laughed aloud.

The teacher, when he beheld this wonderful thing, was much pleased, and said, “Brahmin, this custom in your family line cannot be without cause, that the young do not die. Why is it then that you do not die young?” And he asked his question by repeating the first stanza:

“What custom is it, or what holy way,

Of what good deed is this the fruit, I pray?

Tell me, O Brahmin, what the reason is,

Why in your line the young die never—say!”

Then the brahmin, to explain what virtues had the result that in his family no one died young, repeated the following stanzas:

“We walk in uprightness, we speak no lies,

All foul and wicked sins we keep afar,

We do eschew all things that evil are,

Therefore in youth not one among us dies.

“We hear the deeds of foolish and of wise;

Of what the foolish do no heed we take,

The wise we follow, and the fools forsake;

Therefore in youth not one among us dies.

“In gifts beforehand our contentment lies;

Even while giving we are well content;

Nor having given, do we then repent:

Therefore in youth not one among us dies.

“Priests, brahmins, wayfarers we satisfy,

Beggars, and mendicants, and all who need,

We give them drink, and hungry folk we feed:

Therefore the young among us do not die.

“Wedded, for others’ wives we do not sigh,

But we are faithful to the marriage vow;

And faithful are our wives to us, I trow:

Therefore the young among us do not die.

“The children that from these true wives are sprung

Are wise abundantly, to learning bred,

Versed in the Vedas, and all perfected;

Therefore none dies of us while he is young.

“Each to do right for sake of heaven tries:

So lives the father, and so lives the mother,

So son and daughter, sister so and brother:

Therefore no one of us when youthful dies.

“For sake of heaven our servants too apply

Their lives to goodness, men and maidens all,

Retainers, servitors, each meanest thrall:

Therefore the young among us do not die.”

And lastly, by these two stanzas he declared the goodness of those who walk in righteousness:

“Righteousness saves him that thereto is bent;

Righteousness practised well brings happiness;

Them that do righteously this boon doth bless—

The righteous comes not into punishment.

“Righteousness saves the righteous, as a shade

Saves in the time of rain: the lad still lives.

Goodness to Dhammapala safety gives;

Some other's bones are these you have conveyed."

On hearing this, the teacher replied: "A happy journey is this journey of mine, fruitful, not without fruit!" Then full of happiness, he begged pardon of Dhammapala's father, and added, "I came hither, and brought with me these wild goat's bones, on purpose to try you. Your son is safe and well. I pray you, impart to me your rule of preserving life." Then the other wrote it upon a leaf; and after tarrying in that place some few days, he returned to Takkasila, and having instructed Dhammapala in all branches of skill and learning, he dismissed him with a great troop of followers.

When the Master had thus discoursed to the Great King Suddhodana, he declared the Truths, and identified the Birth: (now at the conclusion of the truths the King became established in the fruit of the Third Path:)—"At that time, mother and father were the Maharaja's kin, the teacher was Sariputta, the retinue was the Buddha's retinue, and I myself was the younger Dhammapala."

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.

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

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

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