Ja 476 — Javana-Hamsa 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

“Come, Goose,” etc.—This story the Master told at Jetavana about the Dalhadhamma Suttanta or the Parable of the Strong Men. The Blessed One said: “Suppose, Brethren, four archers to stand at the four points of the compass, strong men, well trained and of great skill, perfect in archery and then let a man come and say, “If these four archers, strong, well trained, and of great skill, perfect in archery shoot forth arrows from four points, I will catch those arrows as they are shot, and before they touch the ground”: would you not agree, sure enough, that he must be a very swift man and the perfection of swiftness? Well, Brethren, great as the swiftness of such a man might be, great as the swiftness of sun and moon, there is something swifter: great, I say, Brethren, as the swiftness of such a man might be, great as the swiftness of the sun and moon, and though the gods outfly sun or moon in swiftness, there is something swifter than the gods: great, Brethren, as the swiftness of that man (and so forth), yet more swiftly than the gods can go, the elements which make up life do decay. Therefore, Brethren, this ye must learn, to be careful; verily I say unto you, this ye must learn.” Two days after this teaching, they were talking about it in the Hall of Truth: “Brethren, the Master in his own peculiar province as Buddha, illustrating the nature of what makes up life, showed it to be transient and weak, and smote with extreme terror Brethren and unconverted alike. Oh, the might of a Buddha!” The Master entering asked what they talked of. They told him; and he said, “It is no marvel, Brethren, if I in my omniscience alarm the Brethren by my teaching, and show how transient are life’s elements. Even I, when without natural cause I was conceived by a Goose, showed forth the transient nature of the elements of life, and by my teaching alarmed the whole court of a king, together with the king of Benares himself.” So saying, he told a story of the past.

Once upon a time, when Brahmadatta was king in Benares, the Great Being was born as a swift Goose, which lived in Mount Cittakuta in a flock of ninety thousand other such Geese. One day, having along with his flock eaten the wild rice that grew in a certain pool in the plains of India, he flew through the air (and it was as though a golden mat were spread from end to end of the city of Benares), and he flew slowly as in sport to Cittakuta. Now the

king of Benares saw him; and said to his courtiers, “Yon bird must be a king, as I am.” He took a fancy to the bird, and taking with him garlands, perfumes and unguents, went looking for the Great Being; and with him he caused to go all manner of musick. When the Great Being saw him doing honour in this way, he asked the other Geese, “When a king would do such honour to me, what does he want?” “He wants to make friends with you, my lord.” “Well, let me be friends with the king,” quoth he; and he made friends with the king, and then returned.

One day after this, when the king was in his park, and went to Lake Anotatta, the bird flew to the king, having water on one wing and powder of sandalwood on the other; with the water he sprinkled the king, and cast the powder upon him, then while the company looked on, away he flew with his flock to Cittakuta. From that time the king used to long for the Great Being; he would linger, watching the way by which he came, and thinking—“To-day my comrade will come.”

Now the two youngest Geese belonging to the flock of the Great Being, made up their minds to fly a race with the sun; so they asked leave of the Great Being, to try a race with the sun. “My lads,” quoth he, “the sun’s speed is swift, and you will never be able to race with him. You will perish in the course, so do not go.” A second time they asked, and a third time; but the Bodhisatta withstood them up to the third time of asking. But they stood to it, not knowing their own strength, and were resolved without telling the king to fly with the sun. So before sunrise they had taken their places on the peak of the Mount Yugandhara. The Great Being missed them, and asked whither they had gone. When he heard what had happened, he thought, “They will never be able to fly with the sun, but will perish in the course. I will save their lives.” So he too went to the peak of Yugandhara, and sat beside them. When the sun’s round showed over the horizon, the young Geese rose, and darted forward along with the sun; the Great Being flew forward with them. The youngest flew on into the forenoon, then grew faint; in the joints of his wings he felt as if a fire had been kindled. Then he made a signal to the Great Being: “Brother, I can’t do it!” “Fear not,” said the Great Being, “I will save you;” and taking him on his outspread wings, he soothed him, and conveyed him to Mount Cittakuta, and placed him in the midst of the Geese. Then he flew off, and catching up the sun, went on side by side with the other. Until near midday the other flew with the sun, and then he grew faint and felt as though a fire had been kindled in the joints of his wings. Making a sign to the Great Being, he cried, “Brother, I cannot do it!” Him too the Great Being comforted in the same way, and taking him on his outspread wings, bore him to Cittakuta. At that moment the sun was plumb overhead. The Great Being thought, “To-day I will test the sun’s strength;” and darting back with one swoop, he perched on Yugandhara. Then rising with one swoop he overtook the sun, and flying now in front, now behind, thought to himself, “For me to fly with the sun is profitless, born of mere folly: what is he to me? Away I will to Benares, and there tell my comrade the king a message of righteousness and truth.” Then turning, ere yet the sun had moved from the middle of the sky, he traversed the whole world from end to end; then slackening speed, traversed from end to end the whole of India, and came at last to Benares. The whole city, twelve leagues in compass, was as it were under the bird’s shadow, there was not a crack or crevice; then as by degrees the speed slackened, holes and crevices appeared in the sky. The Great Being went slower, and came down from the air, and

alighted in front of a window. “My comrade is come!” cried the king in great joy; and getting a golden seat for the bird to perch on, said, “Come in, friend, and sit here,” and recited the first stanza:

“Come, noble Goose, come sit you here; dear is your sight to me;

Now you are master of the place; choose anything you see.”

The Great Being perched on the golden seat. The king anointed him under the wings with unguents a hundred times refined, nay, a thousand times, gave him sweet rice and sugared water in a golden dish, and talked with him in a voice of honey— “Good friend, you have come alone; whence come you now?” The bird told him the whole matter at large. Then the king said to him: “Friend, show me too your swiftness against the sun.”—“O mighty king, that swiftness cannot be shown.”—“Then show me something like it.” “Very good, O king, I will show you something like it. Summon your archers who can shoot swift as lightning.” The king sent for them. The Great Being chose four of these, and with them went down from the palace into the courtyard. There he caused to be set up in the ground a stone column, and about his own neck a bell to be bound. He then perched on the top of the stone pillar, and placing the four archers looking away from the pillar towards the four points, said, “O king, let these four men shoot four arrows at the same moment in four different directions, and I will catch these arrows before they touch the ground, and lay them at the men’s feet. You will know when I am gone for the arrows by the tinkling of this bell, but I shall not be seen.” Then all at one moment the men shot the four arrows; he caught them and laid them at the men’s feet, and was seen to be sitting upon the pillar. “Did you see my speed, O king?” he asked; then went on “that speed, O great king, is not my swiftest nor my middle speed, ’Tis my slowest of the slow: and this will show you how swift I am.” Then the king asked him, “Well, friend, is there any speed swifter than yours?” “There is, my friend. Swifter than my swiftest a hundredfold, a thousandfold, nay a hundred thousandfold, is the decay of the elements of life in living beings: so they crumble away, so they are destroyed.” Thus he made clear, how the world of form crumbles away, being destroyed moment by moment. The king hearing this was in fear of death, could not keep his senses, but fell in a faint. The multitude were in despair, they sprinkled the king’s face with water, and brought him round. Then the Great Being said to him, “O great king, fear not; but remember death. Walk in righteousness, give alms and do good, be careful.” Then the king answered and said, “My lord, without a wise teacher like you I cannot live, do not return to mount Cittakuta, but stay here, instruct me, be my teacher to teach me!” and he put this request in two stanzas:

“By hearing of the loved one love is fed,

By sight the craving for the lost falls dead:

Since sight and hearing makes men lief and dear,

With sight of you let me be favoured.

“Dear is your voice, and dearer far your presence when I see:

Then since I love the sight of you, O Goose, come dwell with me!”

The Bodhisatta said:

“Ever would I dwell with thee, in the honour thus conferred;

But thou mightst say in wine one day—“Broil me that royal Bird!”

“No,” said the king, “then I will never touch wine or strong drink,” and he made this promise in the following stanza:

“Accursed be both food and drink I should love more than thee;

And I will taste no drop nor sup while thou shalt stay with me!”

After this the Bodhisatta recited six stanzas:

“The cry of jackals or of birds is understood with ease;

Yea, but the word of men, O king, is darker far than these!

“A man may think, “this is my friend, my comrade, of my kin,”

But friendship goes, and often hate and enmity begin.

“Who has your heart, is near to you, with you, where er he be;

But who dwells with you, and your heart estranged, afar is he.

“Who in your house of kindly heart shall be

Is kindly still though far across the sea:

Who in your house shall hostile be of heart,

Hostile he is though ocean-wide apart.

“Thy foes, O lord of chariots! though near thee, are afar:

But, fosterer of thy realm! the good in heart close linked are.

“Who stay too long, find oftentimes that friend is changed to foe;

Then ere I lose your friendship, I will take my leave, and go.”

Then the king said to him:

“Though I with folded hands beseech, you will not give me ear;

You spare no word for us, to whom your service would be dear

I crave one favour: come again and pay a visit here.”

Then the Bodhisatta said:

“If nothing comes to snap our life, O king! if you and I

Still live, O fosterer of thy folk! perhaps I’ll hither fly,

And we may see each other yet, as days and nights go by.”

With this address to the king, the Great Being departed to Cittakuta.

When the Master had ended this discourse, he said: “Thus, Brethren, long ago, even when I was born as one of the animals, I showed the frailty of all life’s elements, and declared the Truth.” So saying, he identified the Birth: “At that time Ananda was the king, Moggallana was the youngest bird, Sariputta was the second, the Buddha’s followers were all Geese of the flock, and I myself was the swift Goose.”

The Jātaka, or Stories of the Buddha’s Former Births, edited by E.B. Cowell, published by The Cambridge University Press.

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