Ja 491 — Maha-Mora Jātaka

English translation by W. H. D. Rouse.

Source: https://raw.githubusercontent.com/suttacentral/sc-data/2d9ca8da858f94302ed6783e2717bf73d651881b/html_text/en/pli/sutta/kn/ja/vol4/ja491.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

“If I being captured,” etc. This story the Master told while dwelling in Jetavana, about a backsliding Brother. To this Brother the Master said, “Is it true, as I am told, that you have backslidden?” “Yes, Sir, it is true.” “Brother,” said he, “will not this lust for pleasure confound a man like you? The hurricane that overwhelms Mount Sineru is not put to the blush before a withered leaf. In days of yore this passion has confounded holy beings, who for seven thousand years held aloof from following the lusts that arise within.” With these words, he told a story of the past.

Once upon a time, when Brahmadatta was king of Benares, the Bodhisatta was conceived by a Peahen in a border country. When the due time had passed, the mother laid her egg in the place where she was feeding, and went away. Now the egg of a mother which is healthy comes to no harm, if there be no danger from snakes or such-like vermin. This egg therefore being of a golden colour like to a kanikara bud, when it was ripe, cracked of its own force, and issued forth a peachick of the colour of gold, with two eyes like gunja fruit, and a coral beak, and three red streaks ran round his throat and down the middle of his back. When he grew up his body was big as a tradesman’s barrow, very fine to behold, and all the dark peafowl gathered together and chose him to be their king.

One day, as he was drinking water out of a pool, he espied his own beauty, and thought, “I am fairest of all peacocks. If I remain with them among the paths of men, I shall fall into some danger: I will go away to Himalaya, and there dwell alone in a pleasant place.” So in the night time, when all the peafowl were in their secret retreats, unknown to any he departed to Himalaya, and traversing three ranges of mountains settled in the fourth. This was in a forest where he found a vast natural lake all covered with lotus, and not far away a huge banyan tree hard by a hill; in the branches of this tree he alighted. In the heart of this hill was a delightsome cave; and being desirous to dwell there, he alighted on a flatland just at the mouth of it. Now to this place it was impossible to climb, whether up from below or down from above; free it was from all fear of birds, wildcats, serpents, or men. “Here is a

delightful place for me!" he thought. That day he remained there, and on the next coming forth from the cave he sat on the hill-top facing the east. When he saw the sun's globe arise, he protected himself for the coming day by reciting the verse "There he rises, king all-seeing." After this he went out seeking for food. In the evening he returned again, and sat on the top of the hill facing the west; then, when he saw the sun's globe sinking out of sight, he protected himself against the coming night by reciting the verse "There he sets, the king all-seeing." In this manner his life was passed.

But one day a hunter who lived in the forest caught sight of him as he sat on the hill-top, and went home again. When his time came to die, he told his son of it: "My son, in the fourth range of the mountains, in the forest, lives a golden peacock. If the king wants one you know where to find him."

One day the chief queen of the king of Benares (her name was Khema) saw a vision in the dawning, and the vision was after this fashion: a golden peacock was preaching the Law, she was listening with approval, the peacock having finished his discourse arose to depart, she cried out upon it "The king of the peacocks is escaping, catch him!" And as she was uttering these words, she awoke. When she awoke, and perceived that it was a dream, she thought, "If I tell the king it was a dream, he will take no notice of it; but if I say it is the longing of a woman with child, then he will take notice." So she made as though she had a craving as they who are with child, and lay down. The king visited her and asked what was her ailment. "I have a craving," said she. "What is it you desire?" "I wish, my lord, to hear the discourse of a golden-hued peacock." "But where can we get such a peacock, lady?" "If one cannot be found, my lord, I shall die." "Do not trouble about it, my lady; if there exist such a one anywhere, it shall be got for you." Thus he consoled her, and then went away and sitting down asked his courtiers the question: "Look you, my queen desires to hear the discourse of a golden peacock. Are there such things as golden peacocks?" "The brahmins will know that, my lord." The king enquired of the brahmins. Thus the brahmins made answer: "O great king! It is said in our verses of lucky marks, Of water-beasts fish, tortoises, and crabs, of land-beasts deer, wild-geese, peacocks, and partridges, these creatures and men too can be of a golden colour." Then the king gathered together all the hunters that were in his domains, and asked them, had they ever before seen a golden peacock. They all answered, no, except the one whose father had told him what he had seen. This one said, "I have never seen one myself, but my father told me of a place where a golden peacock is to be found." Then the king said, "My good man, this means life and death to me and my queen: catch him and bring him hither." He gave the man plenty of money and sent him off. The man gave the money to his wife and son, and went to the place, and saw the Great Being. He set snares for him, each day telling himself the creature would certainly be caught; yet he died without catching him. And the queen too died without having her heart's desire. The king was very angry and wroth, for he said, "My beloved queen has died on account of this peacock"; and he caused the story to be written upon a golden plate, how that in the fourth range of Himalaya lives a golden peacock, and they who eat his flesh will be ever young and immortal. This plate he placed in his treasury, and afterwards died. After him another king rose up, who read what was written upon the plate, and being desirous to be immortal and ever young, sent a hunter to catch him; but he died first like the other. In this manner six kings succeeded and passed away, six

hunters died unsuccessful in Himalaya. But the seventh hunter, sent by the seventh king, being unable to catch the bird through seven years, although each day he expected to do it, began to wonder, why there was no catching this peacock's feet in a snare. So he watched the bird, and saw him at his prayers for protection morning and evening, and thus he argued the case: "There is no other peacock in the place, and it is clear this must be a bird of holy life. It is the power of his holiness, and of the protecting charm, which makes his feet never to catch in my snare." Having come to this conclusion, he went to the borderland and caught a peahen, which he trained at finger-snap to utter her note, at clap of hand to dance. Taking her with him, he returned; then setting his snare before the Bodhisatta had recited his charm, he snapt his fingers, and made her utter a cry. The peacock heard it: on the instant, the sin which for seven thousand years had lain quiescent, reared itself up like a cobra spreading his hood at a blow. Being sick with lust, he could not recite his protecting charm, but making all haste towards her, he came down from the air with his feet right in the snare: that snare which for seven thousand years had no power to catch him, now caught his foot fast. When the hunter spied him dangling at the end of the stick, he thought to himself, "Six hunters failed to catch this king of the peacocks, and for seven years I could not. But to-day, so soon as he became lust-sick for this peahen, he was unable to repeat his charm, came to the snare and was caught, and there he dangles head downwards. So virtuous is the being which I have hurt! To hand over such a creature to another for the sake of a bribe is an unseemly thing. What are the king's honours to me? I will let him go." But again he thought, "'Tis a monstrous mighty and strong bird, and if I go up to him he may think I have come to kill him, he will be in fear of his life, and in struggling he may break a leg or a wing. I will not go near him, but I will stand in hiding and cut the snare with an arrow. Then he can go his ways at his own will." So he stood hidden, and stringing his bow fitted an arrow to the string and drew it back.

Now the peacock was thinking, "This hunter has made me sick with lust, and when he sees me caught he will not be careless of me. Where can he be?" He looked this way, and he looked that way, and spied the man standing with bow ready to shoot. "No doubt he wants to kill me and go," thought he, and in fear of death repeated the first stanza asking for his life:

"If I being captured wealth to thee shall bring,

Then wound me not, but take me still alive.

I pray thee, friend, conduct me to the king:

Methinks a most rich guerdon he will give."

Hereupon the hunter thought, "The great peacock imagines I am going to shoot him with this arrow: I must relieve his mind," to which end he recited the second stanza:

"I have not set this arrow to the bow,

To do thee hurt, O peacock king, to-day:

I wish to cut the snare and let thee go,

Then follow thy own will, and fly away.”

To this the peacock replied in two stanzas:

“Seven years, O hunter, first thou didst pursue,

Enduring thirst and hunger night and day:

Now I am in the snare, what wouldst thou do?

Why wish to loose me, let me fly away?

“Surely all living things are safe for thee:

Taking of life thou hast forsworn this day:

For I am in the snare, yet thou wouldst free,

Yet thou wouldst loose me, let me fly away.”

Then this follows:

“When a man swears to hurt no living thing:

When all that live, for him, from fear are free:

What blessing in the next birth will this bring?

O royal peacock, answer this for me!”

“When all that live, for him, from fear are free,

When the man swears to hurt no living thing,

Even in the present world, well praised is he,

Him after death to heaven his worth will bring.”

“There are no gods, so many men do say:

The highest bliss this life alone can bring;

This yields the fruit of good or evil way;

And giving is declared a foolish thing.

So I snare birds, for holy men have said it:

Do not their words, I ask, deserve my credit?”

Then the Great Being determined to tell the man the reality of another world; and as he swung at the end of the rod head-downwards, he repeated a stanza:

“All clear to vision sun and moon both go

High in the sky along their shining way.

What do men call them in the world below?

Are they of this world or another, say!”

The hunter repeated a stanza:

“All clear to vision sun and moon both go

High in the sky along their shining way.

They are no part of this our world below,

But of another: that is what men say.”

Then the Great Being said to him:

“Then they are wrong, they lie who such things say;

Without all cause, who say this world can bring

Alone the fruit of good or evil way,

Or who declare giving a foolish thing.”

As the Great Being spoke, the hunter pondered, and then repeated a couple of stanzas:

“Verily this is true which thou dost say:

How can one say that gifts no fruit can bring?

That here one reaps the fruit of evil way

Or good; that giving is a foolish thing?

“How shall I act, what do, what holy way

Am I to follow, peacock king, O tell!

What manner of ascetic virtue—say,

That I be saved from sinking into hell!"

The Great Being thought, when he heard this, "If I solve this problem for him, the world will seem all empty and vain. I will tell him for this time the nature of upright and holy ascetic brahmins." With this intent he repeated two stanzas:

"They on the earth, who hold the ascetic vows,

In yellow clad, not dwelling in a house,

Who go forth early for to get their food,

Not in the afternoon : these men are good.

Visit in season such good men as these,

And question any one it shall thee please:

They will explain the matter, for they know,

About the other world and this below."

Thus speaking, he terrified the man with the fear of hell. The other attained to the perfect state of a Pacceka Bodhisatta; for he lived with his knowledge on the point of ripening, like a ripe lotus bud looking for the touch of the sun's rays. As the hunter hearkened to his discourse, standing where he was, he understood all in a moment the constituent parts of existing things, grasped their three properties, and penetrated to the knowledge of a Pacceka Buddha. This comprehension of his, and the setting free of the Great Being from the snare, came both in one instant. The Pacceka Buddha, having annihilated his lusts and desires, standing on the uttermost verge of existence, uttered his aspiration in this stanza:

"Like as the serpent casts his withered skin,

A tree her sere leaves when the green begin:

So I renounce my hunter's craft this day,

My hunter's craft for ever cast away."

Having uttered this sublime aspiration, he thought, "I have just now been set free from the bonds of sin; but at home I have many a bird held fast in bondage, and how am I to set them free?" So he asked the Great Being: "King Peacock, there are many birds I left in bondage at home, how can I set them free?" Now the Bodhisattas, who are omniscient,

have a better knowledge and comprehension of ways and means than a Pacceka Buddha; therefore he answered, “As you have broken the power of lust, and penetrated the knowledge of a Pacceka Buddha, on that ground make an Act of Truth, and in all India there shall be no creature left in bonds.” Then the other, entering by the door which the Bodhisatta thus opened for him, repeated this stanza, making an Act of Truth:

“All those my feathered fowl that I did bind,

Hundreds and hundreds, in my house confined,

Unto them all I give their life to-day,

And freedom: let them homewards fly away.”

Then by his Act of Truth, though late, they were all set free from confinement, and twittering joyously went home to their own places. At the same moment throughout all India all creatures bound were set free, and not one was left in bondage, not so much as a cat. The Pacceka Buddha uplifted his hand, and rubbed his forehead: immediately the family mark disappeared, and the mark of the religious appeared in its place. He then, like an Elder of sixty years, fully dressed, carrying the eight necessary things. made a reverential obeisance to the royal Peacock, and walking around him right-wise, rose up in the air, and went away to the cavern on the peak of Mount Nanda. The peacock also, rising up from the snare, took his food and departed to the place in which he lived.

The last stanza was repeated by the Master, telling how for seven years the hunter went about snare in hand, and was then set free from pain by the peacock king:

“The hunter traversed all the forest land

To catch the lord of peacocks, snare in hand.

The glorious lord of peacocks he set free

From pain, as soon as he was caught, like me.”

Having ended this discourse, the Master declared the Truths: now at the conclusion of the Truths, the backsliding Brother attained to sainthood: then he identified the Birth by saying, “At that time I was the peacock king.”

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

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