Ja 502 — Hamsa Jātaka

English translation by W. H. D. Rouse.

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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

“There go the birds,” etc.—This story the Master told while dwelling in the Bamboo Grove, about Elder Ananda’s renunciation of life. Then also the Brethren were talking in the Hall of Truth about the Elder’s good qualities, when the Master came in and asked them what they sat talking of there. He said, “This is not the first time, Brethren, that Ananda has renounced his life for my sake, but he did the same before.” And then he told them a story of the past.

Once upon a time, there reigned in Benares a king named Bahuputtaka, or the Father of Many Sons, and his Queen Consort was Khema. At that time the Great Being dwelt on Mount Cittakuta, and he was the chief of ninety thousand wild geese, having come to life as a golden goose. And at that time, as already recounted, the queen saw a dream, and told the king she had conceived a woman’s craving to hear a Golden Goose discourse of the Law. When the king enquired, were there any such creatures as golden geese, he was told yes, there were on Mount Cittakuta. Then he had made a lake which he called Khema, and caused to be planted all manner of food-corn, and daily in the four quarters made proclamation of immunity to be cried, and sent forth a hunter to catch geese. How this man was sent forth, and his watching of the birds, and how news was told the king when the golden geese came, and in what manner the snare was set and the Great Being was caught in the snare, how Sumukha chief captain of the geese saw him not in the three divisions of the geese, and returned, all this will be set forth in the Mahahamsa Birth. Now as then the Great Being was caught in the noose and stick; and even as he hung in the noose at the end of the stick, he stretched forth his neck looking along the way that the geese had gone, and espying Sumukha as he came, thought, “When he comes I will put him to the test.” So when he came, the Great Being repeated three stanzas:

“There go the birds, the ruddy geese, all overcome with fear:

O golden-yellow Sumukha, depart! what want you here?

“My kith and kin deserted me, away they all have flown,

Without a thought they fly away: why are you left alone?

“Fly, noble bird! with prisoners no fellowship can be:

Sumukha, fly! nor lose the chance while you may yet be free.”

To which Sumukha replied, sitting on the mud—

“No, I’ll not leave you, Royal Goose, when trouble draweth nigh:

But stay I will, and by your side will either live or die.”

Thus Sumukha, with a lion’s note; and Dhatarattha answered with this stanza:

“A noble heart, brave words are these, Sumukha, which you say:

’Twas but to put you to the test I bade you fly away.”

As they were thus conversing together, up comes the huntsman, staff in hand, at the top of his speed. Sumukha encouraged Dhatarattha, and flew to meet the man, respectfully declaring the virtues of the royal bird. Immediately the hunter’s heart was softened; which Sumukha perceiving, went back, and stood encouraging the king of the geese. And the hunter approaching the king of the geese, recited the sixth stanza:

“They foot it by unfooted ways, birds flying in the sky:

And did you not, O noble Goose, afar the snare espy?”

The Great Being said:

“When life is coming to an end, and death’s hour draws anigh,

Though you may close upon it come nor trap nor snare you spy.”

The hunter, pleased with the bird’s remark, then addressed three stanzas to Sumukha.

“There go the birds, the ruddy geese, all overcome with fear:

And you, O golden-yellow fowl, are still left waiting here.

“They ate and drank, the ruddy geese: uncaring, they are flown;

Away they scurry through the air, and you are left alone.

“What is this fowl, that when the rest deserting him have flown,

Though free, you join the prisoner—why are you left alone?”

Sumukha replied:

“He is my comrade, friend, and king, dear as my life is he:

Forsake him—no, I never will, until death calls for me.”

On hearing this the hunter was much pleased, and thought within him—“If I should harm virtuous creatures like these, the earth would gape open and swallow me up. What care I for the king’s reward? I will set them free.” And he repeated a stanza:

“Now seeing that for friendship’s sake you are prepared to die,

I set your king and comrade free, to follow where you fly.”

This said, he drew down Dhatarattha from the stick, and loosed the noose, and took him to the bank, and pitifully washed the blood from him, and set the dislocated muscles and tendons. And by reason of his kindness of heart, and by the might of the Great Being’s Perfections, on the instant his foot became whole again, and not a mark showed where he had been caught. Sumukha beheld the Great Being with joy, and gave thanks in these words:

“With all your kindred and your friends, O hunter, happy be,

As I am happy to behold the King of birds set free.”

When the hunter heard this, he said, “Now you may depart, friend.” Then the Great Being said to him, “Did you capture me for your own purposes, my good sir, or at the bidding of another?” He told him the facts. The other wondered whether it were better to return to Cittakuta, or go to the town. “If I go to the town,” he thought, “the hunter will be rewarded, the queen’s craving will be appeased, Sumukha’s friendship will be made known, then also by virtue of my wisdom I shall receive the lake Khema, as a free gift. It is better therefore to go to the city.” This determined, he said, “Huntsman, take us on your carrying-pole to the king, and he shall set me free if he will.”—“My lord, kings are hard; go your ways.”—“What! I have softened a hunter like thee, and shall I not find favour with a king? Leave that to me; your part, friend, is to convey us to him.” The man did so.

When the king set eyes on the geese, he was delighted. He placed both the geese on a golden perch, gave them honey and fried grain to eat and sweetened water to drink, and holding his hands out in supplication prayed them to speak of the Law. The king of the geese seeing how eager he was to hear first addressed him in pleasant words. These are the stanzas expressing the converse of king and goose one with another.

Now has his honor health and wealth, and is the kingdom full

Of welfare and prosperity, and does he justly rule?”

“O here is health and wealth, O Goose, and here’s a kingdom full

Of welfare and prosperity, with just and righteous rule.”

“Is there no blemish seen amid your court, and are your foes

Far off; and like the shadow on the south, which never grows ?”

“There is no blemish seen amid my courtiers, and my foes

Far off are like the shadow on the south, which never grows.”

“And is your queen of equal birth, obedient, sweet of speech,

Fruitful, fair, famous, waiting on your wishes, doing each?”

“O yes, my queen’s of equal birth, obedient, sweet of speech,

Fruitful, fair, famous, waiting on my wishes, doing each.”

“O fostering ruler! have you sons a many, nobly bred,

Quickwitted, easy men to please whatever thing be sped?”

“O Dhatarattha! sons I have of fame, five score and one:

Tell them their duty: they’ll not leave your good advice undone.”

On hearing this, the Great Being gave them admonition in five stanzas:

“He that puts off until too late the effort to do good,

Though nobly bred, with virtue dowered, yet sinks beneath the flood.

“His knowledge fades, great loss is his; as one moonblind at night

Sees all things swollen twice their size with his imperfect sight.

“Who sees the truth in falsity no wisdom gains at all,

As on a rugged mountain-path the deer will often fall.

“If any strong courageous man loves virtue, follows right,

Though but a low-born churl, he burns like bonfires in the night.

“By using this similitude all wisdom’s truths explain,

Cherish your sons till wise they grow, like seedlings in the rain.”

Thus did the Great Being discourse to the king the livelong night. The queen’s craving was appeased. By sunrise he established him in the virtues of kings, and exhorted him to be vigilant, then with Sumukha flew out of the northern window and to Cittakuta away.

After this discourse, the Master said, “Thus, Brethren, this man offered his life for me before,” and then he identified the Birth: “At that time Channa was the huntsman, Sariputta the king, a sister was Queen Khema, the Sakiya tribe was the flock of geese, Ananda was Sumukha, and I was the Goose King 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.

Vol. 2, translated by W.H.D. Rouse, 1895.

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

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