Ja 510 — Ayoghara Jātaka

English translation by W. H. D. Rouse.

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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

“Life once conceived, etc.” This story the Master told about the Great Renunciation. Here again he said, “This is not the first time, Brethren, that the Tathagata has made the Great Renunciation, for he did the same before.” And he told them a story of the past.

Once upon a time, when Brahmadatta reigned in Benares, the queen consort conceived, and when her full time was come she brought forth a son just after dawn of day. Now in a former existence, another wife of the same husband had prayed that she might be able to devour the child of this woman; she, it is said, was barren, and being angry with mother and son uttered this prayer, for which cause she came into being as a goblin. The other became the king’s consort, and brought forth this son. Well, the she-goblin found her chance, and putting on a horrific shape caught up the child from under the mother’s eyes and made off. The queen screamed with a loud voice—“A goblin is carrying off my son!” The other champed and mumbled him like an onion, and swallowed him down; then after various transformations of her limbs, which annoyed and frightened the queen, departed. When the king heard, he was dumb: what could be done, thought he, against a goblin?

Next time the queen was in childbed, he set a strong guard about her. She bore another son; the goblin again came, and devoured him too, and departed.

The third time it was the Great Being conceived in her womb. The king gathered a number of people together, and said: “Each son my queen has brought forth, a she-goblin comes and devours him. What is to be done?” Then some one said, “Goblins are afraid of a palm-leaf; you should bind one such leaf on each of her hands and feet.” Another said, “It is an iron house they fear; one should be made.” The king was willing. He summoned all the smiths in his realm and bade them build him an iron house, and set overseers over them. Right in the town in a pleasant place they builded a house; pillars it had, and all the parts of a house, all made of nothing but iron: in nine months there it stood finished, a great hall foursquare: it shone, lighted continually with lamps.

When the king knew that she drew near her time, he had the iron house fitted up, and took her into it. She brought forth a son with the marks of goodness and luck upon him, and they gave him the name of Ayoghara-Kumara, the Prince of the Iron House. The king gave him in charge to nurses, and placed a great guard about the place, while he with his queen made the circuit of the whole city rightwise, and then went up to his magnificent terrace. Meanwhile the she-goblin wanting water to drink had been destroyed in trying to fetch some of the water of Vessavana.

In the iron house the Great Being grew up, and increased in wisdom, and there also he was educated in all the sciences.

The king asked his courtiers, "What is my son's age?" They replied, "He is sixteen years old, my lord: a hero, mighty and strong, fit to master a thousand goblins!" The king determined to place the kingdom in his son's hands. He had the city decorated, and gave order that the lad be brought to him out of the iron house. The courtiers obeyed: all Benares was decorated, that great city of twelve leagues in extent; they decked out the state elephant in magnificent caparison, and drest the boy in his best, and placed him upon the elephant's back, saying, "My lord, make a circuit rightwise about the rejoicing city, your inheritance, and salute your father the King of Kasi; for this day you shall receive the White Umbrella." The Great Being made his ceremonial circuit rightwise, and seeing the beautiful parks, the beautiful colours, lakes, plots of ground, all the beautiful houses and so forth, thought thus within himself: "All this while my father has kept me close in prison, never let me see this city so richly adorned. What fault can there be in me?" He put this question to the courtiers. "My lord," they said, "there is no fault in you; but a she-goblin devoured your two brothers, therefore your father made you live in an iron house, and the iron house has saved your life." These words made him think again, "For ten months I was in my mother's womb, as it might have been the Hell of the Iron Caldron or the Hell of Dung; and when I came forth from the womb, for sixteen years I dwelt in this prison, never a chance of looking outside. Though I have escaped the hands of the goblin I am neither free from old age nor death. What care I for royalty? Once established in the royal place it is hard for one to get away. This very day will I ask my father's leave to embrace the religious life, and I will go to Himalaya and do so."

Accordingly after his procession about the city was over, he went to the king's palace, and saluted the king, and stood waiting. The king seeing his bodily beauty, looked at his courtiers with strong love in his eyes. "What do you wish us to do, Sire?" they asked. "Take my son and put him on a pile of jewels, sprinkle him from the three conchs, uplift the White Umbrella with its festoons of gold." But the Great Being saluted his father, and said, "Father, I want nothing to do with royalty. I wish to embrace the religious life, and I crave your leave to do so." "Why would you leave your royalty, my son, and embrace the religious life?"—"My lord, for ten months I was in my mother's womb, as it were the Hell of Dung; once born, for fear of a goblin I dwelt sixteen years in a prison, with never a chance even of looking outside,—I seemed as it were cast into the Ussada hell. Now safe from the goblin I am neither safe from old age nor death, for death no man can conquer. I am weary of existence. Until disease, old age, death comes upon me I will follow the life of the religious, walking in righteousness. No kingdom for me! My lord, grant your permission!" Then he

declared the Law to his father thus:

“Life once conceived within the womb, no sooner has begun,

Than on it goes continually, its course is never done.

“No warlike prowess nor no mighty strength

Can keep men from old age and death at length;

All being plagued with birth and age I see:

So I’m resolved—a holy life for me.

“Great kings by force and violence subdue

Hosts of four arms, terrific to the view;

Over death’s host they win no victory:

So I’m resolved—a holy life for me.

“Though horses, elephants, and cars, and men

Surround them, some have yet got free again;

But from the hands of death no man gets free:

So I’m resolved—a holy life for me.

“With horses, elephants, and cars, and men,

Heroes destroy and crush and crush again;

But to crush death no man so strong I see:

So I’m resolved—a holy life for me.

“Mad elephants in rut with oozing skin

Trample whole towns and slay the men within,

To trample death no one so strong I see:

So I’m resolved—a holy life for me.

“Archers who most strong-armed and skilful are,

Wound like a flash of lightning from afar,

But to wound death no man so strong I see:

So I’m resolved—a holy life for me.

“Great lakes, their woods and rocks, to ruin fall,

After a while ruin shall come to all,

In time all brought to nothing they shall be

So I’m resolved—a holy life for me.

“Like as a tree upon a river brink,

Or as a drunkard sells his coat for drink,

Such is the life of those who mortals be:

So I’m resolved—a holy life for me.”

“The body’s elements dissolve—they fall

Young, old, the middle-aged, men, women—all,

Fall as the fruit falls from a shaken tree:

So I’m resolved—a holy life for me.

“Man’s prime is all unlike the queen whose reign

Rules o’er the stars : it ne’er will come again.

For worn-out eld what joy or love can be?

So I’m resolved—a holy life for me.

“While ghost and sprite and horrid goblin can

When angry breathe their poison-breath on man,

Gainst death their poison-breath no help can be:

So I’m resolved—a holy life for me.

“While ghost and sprite and horrid goblin can

When angry, be appeased by deed of man,

Work it with death, no softening knows he:

So I’m resolved—a holy life for me.

“Those who do crime, and wrong, and hurtful things,

When known, are punished by the act of kings,

But against death no punishment can be:

So I’m resolved—a holy life for me.

“Those who do crime, and wrong, and hurtful things

Can find a way to stay the hand of kings,

But how to stay death’s hand no way can be:

So I’m resolved—a holy life for me.

“Warriors or brahmins, men of high estate,

Men of much wealth, the mighty and the great,—

King Death no pity has, no ruth has he:

So I’m resolved—a holy life for me.

“Lions and tigers, panthers, seize their prey,

And all devour it, struggle as it may;

From fear of their devouring death is free:

So I’m resolved—a holy life for me.

“Upon the stage a juggler with his sleight

Performing can deceive the people’s sight,

To cozen death, no trick so quick can be:

So I’m resolved—a holy life for me.

“Serpents enraged will with envenomed bite

Attack at once and kill a man outright;

For death no fear of poison-bite can be:

So I'm resolved—a holy life for me.

"Serpents enraged with venomed fangs may bite,

The skilful leach can stay the poison's might;

To cure death's bite no man so strong can be:

So I'm resolved—a holy life for me.

"Physicians' skill could cure the serpent's bite;

Now they are dead themselves and out of sight,

Bhoga, Vetarani, Dhammantari

So I'm resolved—a holy life for me.

"Some who in spells and magic lore are wise

Can walk invisible to other eyes,

Yet not so invisible but death can see:

So I'm resolved—a holy life for me.

"Safe is the man who walks in righteousness;

Religion well observed has power to bless;

Happy the righteous man and never he

While he is righteous falls in misery.

"Is it not true, his proper fruit from right or wrong shall spring?

Right leads to heaven, unrighteousness a man to hell must bring.

When the Great Being had thus declared the Law in twenty-four stanzas, he said, "O great king! keep your kingdom to yourself; I want none of it. Even as I am talking with you, disease, old age, and death draw nearer to me. Stay where you are." Then, as a mad elephant might burst his steel chains, as a young lion might break out of a golden cage, he burst his carnal desires; and saluting his parents, he departed. Then his father said, "I want

not the Kingdom!" and leaving it went with him. When he was gone, the queen and courtiers, brahmins, householders, and everyone else who dwelt in the city, left their houses and went away. There was a great concourse; the crowd covered twelve leagues. With this crowd he set out for Himalaya.

When Sakka perceived that he had departed, he sent Vissakamma to make a hermitage twelve leagues long and seven wide, and bade him put within it all things requisite for the ascetic life. How the Great Being proceeded to admit these into the Brotherhood, and admonished them, and how they became destined for Brahma's world, or entered upon the Third Path, all must be repeated again as before.

This discourse ended, the Master said: "Thus, Brethren, the Tathagata has made the Great Renunciation before"; after which he identified the Birth: "At that time the king's parents were the mother and father, the Buddha's followers were their followers, and I was myself the Wise Ayoghara."

"First seed, then embryo, then shapeless flesh,

Then something solid, out of which soon grow

Thighs, hair on head and body, with the nails:

Whatever food or drink the mother takes,

The baby lives on, in his mother's womb."

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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Prepared for SuttaCentral by Bhikkhu Sujato.