Ja 521 — Tesakuna Jātaka

English translation by H. T. Francis.

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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

"'Tis this I ask," etc. This story the Master, while dwelling at Jetavana, told by way of admonition to the king of Kosala. Now this king came to hear the preaching of the law and the Master addressed him in the following terms: "A king, Sire, ought to rule his kingdom righteously, for whenever kings are unrighteous, then also are his officers unrighteous." And admonishing him in the right way as related in the Catukkanipata (4th Book) he pointed out the suffering and the blessing involved in following or abstaining from evil courses, and expounded in detail the misery resulting from sensual pleasures, comparing them to dreams and the like, saying, "In the case of these men,

No bribe can move relentless death, no kindness mollify,

No one in fight can vanquish death. For all are doomed to die.

And when they depart to another world, except their own virtuous action they have no other sure refuge, so that they must inevitably forsake low associations, and for their reputation's sake they must not be careless, but be earnest and exercise rule in righteousness, even as kings of old, before Buddha arose, abiding in the admonition of the wise, ruled righteously and departing attained to the heavenly city," and at the request of the king he told a story of the past.

Once upon a time Brahmadatta ruled in Benares and had no heir, and his prayer for a son or daughter was not answered. Now one day he went with a large escort to his park and after amusing himself a part of the day in the grounds he had a couch spread for him at the foot of the royal sal tree, and after a short nap he awoke and, looking up to the sal tree, he beheld a bird's nest in it, and at the sight of it a desire to possess it sprang up in his heart, and summoning one of his attendants he said, "Climb the tree and see if there is anything in the nest or not." The man climbed up and finding three eggs in it told the king. "Then mind you do not breathe over them," he said, and, spreading some cotton in a

casket, he told the man to come down gently, and place the eggs in it. When they had been brought down, he took up the casket and asked his courtiers to what bird these eggs belonged. They answered, “We do not know: hunters will know.” The king sent for the hunters and asked them. “Sire,” said they, “one is an owl’s egg, another is a maynah bird’s, and the third is a parrot’s.” “Pray are there eggs of three different birds in one nest?” “Yes, Sire, when there is nothing to fear, what is carefully deposited does not perish.” The king being pleased said, “They shall be my children,” and committing the three eggs to the charge of three courtiers, he said, “These shall be my children. Do you carefully watch over them and when the young birds come out of the shell, let me know.” They took good care of them. First of all the owl’s egg was hatched, and the courtier sent for a hunter and said, “Find out the sex of the young bird, whether it is a cock or a hen bird,” and when he had examined it and declared it to be a cock bird, the courtier went to the king and said, “Sire, a son is born to you.” The king was delighted and bestowed much wealth on him and saying, “Watch carefully over him and call his name Vessantara,” he sent him away. He did as he was told. Then a few days afterwards the egg of the maynah bird was hatched, and the second courtier likewise, after getting the huntsman to examine it, and hearing it was a hen bird, went to the king and announced to him the birth of a daughter. The king was delighted, and gave to him also much treasure and saying, “Watch carefully over my daughter and call her name Kundalini,” he sent him away. He also did what he was told. Then after a few days the parrot’s egg was hatched and the third courtier, when told by the huntsman who examined it that it was a cock bird, went and announced to the king the birth of a son. The king was delighted and paying him liberally said, “Hold a festival in honour of my son with great pomp, and call his name Jambuka,” and then sent him away. He too did as he was told. And these three birds grew up in the houses of the three courtiers with all the ceremony due to royalty. The king speaks of them habitually, as “my son” and “my daughter.” His courtiers made merry, one with another, saying, “Look at what the king does: he goes about speaking of birds as his son and his daughter.” The king thought, “These courtiers do not know the extent of my children’s wisdom. I will make it evident to them.” So he sent one of his ministers to Vessantara to say, “Your father wishes to ask you a question. When shall he come and ask it?” The minister came and bowing to Vessantara delivered the message. Vessantara sent for the courtier who looked after him and said, “My father,” they tell me, “wants to ask me a question. When he comes, we must shew him all respect,” and he asked “When is he to come?” The courtier said, “Let him come on the seventh day from this.” Vessantara on hearing this said, “Let my father come on the seventh day from this,” and with these words he sent the minister away. He went and told the king. On the seventh day the king ordered a drum to be beaten through the city and went to the house where his son lived. Vessantara treated the king with great respect and had great respect paid even to the slaves and hired servants. The king, after partaking of food in the house of Vessantara, and enjoying great distinction, returned to his own dwelling-place. Then he had a big pavilion erected in the palace-yard, and, having made proclamation by beating a drum through the city, he sat in his magnificent pavilion surrounded by a great retinue and sent word to a courtier to conduct Vessantara to him. The courtier brought Vessantara on a golden stool. The bird sat on his father’s lap and played with his father, and then went and sat on the stool. Then the king in the midst of the crowd of people questioned him as to the duty of a king and spoke the first stanza:

’Tis this I ask Vessantara—dear bird, mayst thou be blest

To one that’s fain o’er men to reign, what course of life is best?

Vessantara, without answering the question directly, reproved the king for his carelessness and spoke the second stanza:

Kamsa my sire, of Kasi lord, so careless long ago,

Urged me his son, though full of zeal, still greater zeal to show.

Rebuking the king in this stanza and saying, “Sire, a king ought to rule his kingdom righteously, abiding in the three truths,” and telling of a king’s duty he spoke these stanzas:

First of all should a king put away all falsehood and anger and scorn;

Let him do what a king has to do, or else to his vow be forsworn.

By passion and sin led astray, should he err in the past, it is plain

He will live to repent of the deed, and will learn not to do it again.

When a prince in his rule groweth slack, untrue to his name and his fame,

Should his wealth all at once disappear, of that prince it is counted as shame.

’Twas thus that Good Fortune and Luck, when I asked, made reply unto me,

“In a man energetic and bold we delight, if from jealousy free.”

Ill Luck, ever wrecking good fortune, delighteth in men of ill deeds,

The hard-hearted creatures in whom a spirit of jealousy breeds.

To all, O great king, be a friend, so that all may thy safety insure,

Ill Luck put away, but to Luck that is good be a dwelling secure.

The man that is lucky and bold, O thou that o’er Kasi dost reign,

His foes will destroy root and branch, and to greatness will surely attain.

Great Sakka all courage in man ever watches with vigilant eyes,

For courage as virtue he holds and in it true goodness espies.

Gandharvas, gods, angels and men, one and all, emulate such a king,

And spirits appearing stand by, of his zeal and his vigour to sing.

Be zealous to do what is right, nor, however reviled, yield to sin,

Be earnest in efforts for good—no sluggard can bliss ever win.

Herein is the text of thy duty, to teach thee the way thou shouldst go:

'Tis enough to win bliss for a friend or to work grievous ill for a foe.

Thus did the bird Vessantara in a single stanza rebuke the carelessness of the king, and then in telling the duty of a king in eleven stanzas answered his question with all the charm of a Buddha. The hearts of the multitude were filled with wonder and amazement and innumerable shouts of applause were raised. The king was transported with joy and addressing his courtiers asked them what was to be done for his son, for having spoken thus. "He should be made a general in the army, Sire." "Well, I give him the post of general," and he appointed Vessantara to the vacant post. Thenceforth placed in this position he carried out his father's wishes. Here ends the story of Vessantara's question.

Again the king after some days, just as before, sent a message to Kundalini, and on the seventh day he paid her a visit and returning home again he seated himself in the centre of a pavilion and ordered Kundalini to be brought to him, and when she was seated on a golden stool, he questioned her as to the duty of a king and spoke this stanza:

Kundalini, of royal birth, couldst thou resolve my quest,

To one that's fain o'er men to reign, what course of life is best?

When the king thus asked her as to the duties of a king, she said, "I suppose, Sir, you are putting me to the test, thinking "What will a woman be able to tell me?" so I will tell you, putting all your duty as a king into just two maxims," and she repeated these stanzas:

The matter, my friend, is set forth in a couple of maxims quite plain—

To keep whatsoever one has, and whatever one has not to gain.

Take as counsellors men that are wise, thy interests clearly to see,

Not given to riot and waste, from gambling and drunkenness free.

Such an one as can guard thee aright and thy treasure with all proper zeal,

As a charioteer guides his car, he with skill steers the realm's common weal.

Keep ever thy folk well in hand; and duly take stock of thy pelf,

Ne’er trust to another a loan or deposit, but act for thyself.

What is done or undone to thy profit and loss it is well thou shouldst know,

Ever blame the blame-worthy and favour on them that deserve it bestow.

Thou thyself, O great king, shouldst instruct thy people in every good way,

Lest thy realm and thy substance should fall to unrighteous officials a prey.

See that nothing is done by thyself or by others with overmuch speed,

For the fool that so acts without doubt will live to repent of the deed.

To wrath one should never give way, for should it due bounds overflow,

It will lead to the ruin of kings and the proudest of houses lay low.

Be sure that thou never as king thy people mislead to their cost,

Lest all men and women alike in an ocean of trouble be lost.

When a king from all fear is set free, and the pleasures of sense are his aim,

Should his riches and all disappear, to that king it is counted as shame.

Herein is a text of thy duty, to teach thee the way thou shouldst go,

Be an adept in every good work, to excess and to riot a foe,

Study virtue, for vice ever leads to a state full of suffering and woe.

Thus did Kundalini also teach the king his duty in eleven stanzas. The king was delighted and addressing his courtiers asked them, saying, “What is to be given to my daughter as a reward for her having spoken thus?” “The office of treasurer, Sire.” “Well then, I grant her the post of treasurer,” and he appointed Kundalini to the vacant post. Thenceforth she held the office and acted for the king. Here ends the story of the question of Kundalini.

Again the king after the lapse of a few days, just as before, sent a messenger to the wise Jambuka, and going there on the seventh day and being magnificently entertained he returned home and in the same manner took his seat in the centre of a pavilion. A courtier placed the wise Jambuka on a stool bound with gold, and came bearing the stool on his head. The wise bird sitting on his father’s lap and playing with him at length took his seat on the golden stool. Then the king, asking him a question, spoke this stanza:

We’ve questioned both thy brother prince, and also fair Kundalini;

Now, Jambuka, do thou in turn the highest power declare to me.

Thus did the king, in asking a question of the Great Being, not ask him in the way in which he had asked the others, but asked him in a special way. Then the wise bird said to him, “Well, Sire, listen attentively, and I will tell you all,” and like a man placing a purse containing a thousand pieces of money into an outstretched hand, he began his exposition of a king’s duty:

Amidst the great ones of the earth a fivefold power we see;

Of these the power of limbs is, sure, the last in its degree,

And power of wealth, O mighty lord, the next is said to be.

The power of counsel third in rank of these, O king, I name;

The power of caste without a doubt is reckoned fourth in fame,

And all of these a man that’s wise most certainly will claim.

Of all these powers that one is best, as power of learning known,

By strength of this a man is wise and makes success his own.

Should richest realm fall to the lot of some poor stupid wight,

Another will by violence seize it in his despite.

However noble be the prince, whose lot it is to rule,

He is hard put to live at all, if he should prove a fool.

’Tis wisdom tests reports of deeds and makes men’s fame to grow,

Who is with wisdom gifted still finds pleasure e’en in woe.

None that are heedless in their ways to wisdom can attain,

But must consult the wise and just, or ignorant remain.

Who early rising shall betimes unweariedly give heed

To duty’s varied calls, in life is certain to succeed.

No one that’s bent on hurtful things or acts in listless mood

In aught that he may undertake will come to any good.

But one that will unweariedly a rightful course pursue,

Is sure to reach perfection in whatever he may do.

To safeguard one's store is to gain more and more,

And these are the things I would have thee to mind;

For the fool by ill deeds, like a house built of reeds,

Collapses and leaves rack and ruin behind.

Thus did the Bodhisatta in all these points sing the praises of the five powers, and exalting the power of wisdom, like to one striking the orb of the moon with his words, he admonished the king in eleven stanzas:

Unto thy parents, warrior king, do righteously; and so

By following a righteous life to heaven thou, sire, shalt go.

After uttering ten stanzas about the way of righteousness, still further admonishing the king he spoke the concluding stanza:

Herein is the text of thy duty, to teach thee the way thou shouldst go:

Follow wisdom and ever be happy, the Truth in its fulness to know.

Thus did the Great Being, as though he were letting down the heavenly Ganges, teach the Law with all the charm of a Buddha. And the multitude paid him great honour and raised innumerable shouts of applause. The king was delighted and addressing his councillors asked, "How ought my son, wise Jambuka, with a beak like the fresh fruit of the rose-apple, to be rewarded for having spoken thus?" "With the post of commander-in-chief, Sire." "Then I offer him this post," he said, and appointed him to the vacant office, and thenceforth in the position of commander-in-chief he carried out the orders of his father. Great honour was paid to the three birds, and all three of them gave instruction in temporal and spiritual matters. The king, abiding in the admonition of the Great Being, by almsgiving and other good works became destined to heaven. The councillors after performing the king's obsequies, speaking to the birds said, "My lord, Jambu, the king ordered the royal umbrella to be raised over you." The Great Being said, "I have no need of the kingdom, do you exercise rule with all vigilance," and after establishing the people in the moral law, he said "Execute justice," and he had righteous judgment inscribed on a golden plate and disappeared in the forest. And his admonition continued in force forty thousand years.

The Master by means of his admonition of the king taught this lesson and identified the Birth: "At that time the king was Ananda, Kundalini was Uppalavanna, Vessantara was

Sariputta, the bird Jambu was 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.

Vol. 3, translated by H.T. Francis and R.A. Neil, 1897.

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

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Vol. 6, translated by E.B. Cowell and W.H.D. Rouse, 1907.

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Prepared for SuttaCentral by Bhikkhu Sujato.