Ja 524 — Samkhapala 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

“Of comely presence,” etc. This was a story told by the Master, while dwelling at Jetavana, with regard to the duties of holy days. Now on this occasion the Master, expressing approval of certain lay folk who kept holy days, said: “Wise men of old, giving up the great glory of the Naga world, observed holy days,” and at their request he related a story of the past.

Once upon a time a king of Magadha ruled in Rajagaha. At that time the Bodhisatta was born as the son of this king’s chief consort, and they gave him the name of Duyyodhana. On coming of age he acquired the liberal arts at Takkasila and returned home to see his father. And his father installed him in the kingdom and adopting the religious life took up his abode in the park. Thrice a day did the Bodhisatta come to visit his father who thereby received great profit and honour. Owing to this hindrance he failed to perform even the preparatory rites that lead to mystic meditation and he thought, “I am receiving great profit and honour: so long as I live here, it will be impossible for me to destroy this lust of mine. Without saying a word to my son, I will depart elsewhere.” So not telling a creature he left the park and passing beyond the borders of the realm of Magadha he built him a hut of leaves in the Mahimsaka kingdom, near Mount Candaka, in a bend of the river Kannapenna, where it issues out of the lake Samkhapala. There he took up his abode and performing the preparatory rites he developed the faculty of mystic meditation and subsisted on whatever he could pick up. A king of the Nagas, Samkhapala by name, issuing forth from the Kannapenna river with a numerous company of snakes from time to time would visit the ascetic, and he instructed the Naga king in the Law. Now the son was anxious to see his father and being ignorant as to where he had gone, he set on foot an inquiry, and on finding out that he was dwelling in such and such a place he repaired thither with a large retinue to see him. Having halted a short distance off, accompanied by a few courtiers he set out in the direction of the hermitage. At this moment Samkhapala with a large following sat listening to the Law, but on seeing the king approaching he rose up and with a salutation to the sage he took his departure. The king saluted his father and

after the usual courtesies had been exchanged he inquired, saying, “Reverend sir, what king is this that has been to see you?” “Dear son, he is Samkhapala, the Naga king.” The son by reason of the great magnificence of the Naga conceived a longing for the Naga world. Staying there a few days he furnished his father with a constant supply of food, and then returned to his own city. There he had an alms-hall erected at the four city gates, and by his alms-giving he made a stir throughout all India, and in aspiring to the Naga world he ever kept the moral law and observed the duty of holy days, and at the end of his life he was re-born in the Naga world as king Samkhapala. In course of time he grew sick of this magnificence and from that day desiring to be born as a man he kept the holy days, but dwelling as he did in the Naga world his observance of them was not a success and he deteriorated in morals. From that day he left the Naga world and not far from the river Kannapenna, coiled round an ant-hill between the high road and a narrow path, he there resolved to keep the holy day and took upon himself the moral law. And saying “Let those that want my skin or want my skin and flesh, let them, I say, take it all,” and thus sacrificing himself by way of charity he lay on the top of the ant-hill and, stopping there on the fourteenth and fifteenth of the half-month, on the first day of each fortnight he returned to the Naga world. So one day when he lay there, having taken upon himself the obligation of the moral law, a party of sixteen men who lived in a neighbouring village, being minded to eat flesh, roamed about in the forest with weapons in their hands and when they returned without finding anything, they saw him lying on the ant-hill and thinking, “To-day we have not caught so much as a young lizard, we will kill and eat this snake-king,” but fearing that on account of his great size, even if they caught him, he would escape from them, they thought they would pierce him with stakes just as he lay there coiled up, and after thus disabling him, effect his capture. So taking stakes in their hands they drew nigh to him. And the Bodhisatta caused his body to become as big as a trough-shaped canoe, and looked very beautiful, like a jasmine wreath deposited on the ground, with eyes like the fruit of the gunja shrub and-a head like a jayasumana flower and at the sound of the foot-steps of these sixteen men, drawing out his head from his coils, and opening his fiery eyes, he beheld them coming with stakes in their hands and thought, “To-day my desire will be fulfilled as I lie here, I will be firm in my resolution and yield myself up to then as a sacrifice, and when they strike me with their javelins and cover me with wounds, I will not open my eyes and regard them with anger.” And conceiving this firm resolve through fear of breaking the moral law, he tucked his head into his hood and lay down. Then coming up to him they seized him by the tail and dragged him along the ground. Again dropping him they wounded him in eight different places with sharp stakes and thrusting black bamboo sticks, thorns and all, into his open wounds, so proceeded on their way, carrying him with them by means of strings in the eight several places. The Great Being from the moment of his being wounded by the stakes never once opened his eyes nor regarded the men with anger, but as he was being dragged along by means of the eight sticks his head hung down and struck the ground. So when they found that his head was drooping, they laid him down on the high road and piercing his nostrils with a slender stake they held up his head and inserted a cord, and after fastening it at the end they once more raised his head and set out on their way. At this moment a landowner named Alara, who dwelt in the city of Mithila in the kingdom of Videha, seated in a comfortable carriage was journeying with five hundred wagons, and seeing these lewd fellows on their way with the Bodhisatta, he gave all sixteen of them, together with an ox apiece, a handful of golden coins to each, and

to all of them outer and inner garments, and to their wives ornaments to wear, and so got them to release him. The Bodhisatta returned to the Naga palace and without any delay, issuing forth with a great retinue, he approached Alara, and after singing the praises of the Naga palace he took him with him and returned thither. Then he bestowed great honour on him together with three hundred Naga maidens and satisfied him with heavenly delights. Alara dwelt a whole year in the Naga palace in the enjoyment of heavenly pleasures, and then saying to the Naga king, “My friend, I wish to become an ascetic,” and taking with him everything requisite for the ascetic life he left the abode of the Nagas for the Himalaya region and taking orders dwelt there for a long time. By and bye he went on a pilgrimage and came to Benares where he took up his abode in the king’s park. Next day he entered the city for alms and made his way to the door of the king’s house. The king of Benares on seeing him was so charmed with his deportment that he called him to his presence, seated him on a special seat assigned to him and served him with a variety of dainty food. Then seated on a low seat the king saluted him and conversing with him gave utterance to the first stanza:

Of comely presence and of gracious mien,

A scion thou of noble rank, I ween;

Why then renounce earth’s joys and worldly gear

To adopt the hermit’s robe and rule severe?

In what follows the connexion of the stanzas is to be understood in the way of alternate speeches by the ascetic and the king.

O lord of men, I well remembering

The abode of that almighty Naga king,

Saw the rich fruit that springs from holiness,

And straight believing donned the priestly dress.

Nor fear nor lust nor hate itself may make

A holy man the words of truth forsake:

Tell me the thing that I am fain to know,

And faith and peace within my heart will grow.

O king, on trading venture was I bound.

When these lewd wretches in my path were found,

A full-grown snake in captive chains was led,

And home in triumph joyously they sped.

As I came up with them, O king, I cried,

—Amazed I was and greatly terrified—

“Where are ye dragging, sirs, this monster grim,

And what, lewd fellows, will ye do with him?’

“This full-grown snake that ye see fettered thus

With its huge frame will furnish food to us.

Than this, Alara, thou couldst hardly wish

To taste a better or more savoury dish.”

“Hence to our home we’ll fly and in a trice

Each with his knife cut off a dainty slice

And gladly eat his flesh, for, as you know,

Snakes ever find in us a deadly foe.”

“If this huge snake, late captured in the wood,

Is being dragged along to serve as food,

To each an ox I offer, one apiece,

Should you this serpent from his chains release.”

“Beef has for us a pleasant sound, I vow,

On snake’s flesh we have fed full oft ere now,

Thy bidding, O Alara, we will do;

Henceforth let friendship reign betwixt us two.”

Then they released him from the cord that passed

Right through his nose and knotted held him fast,

The serpent-king set free from durance vile

Turned him towards the east, then paused awhile,

And facing still the east, prepared to fly,

Looked back upon me with a tearful eye,

While I pursuing him upon his way

Stretched forth clasped hands, as one about to pray.

“Speed thou, my friend, like one in haste that goes,

Lest once again thou fall amongst thy foes,

Of such like ruffians shun the very sight,

Or thou mayst suffer to thine own despite.”

Then to a charming limpid pool he sped

—Canes and rose apples both its banks o’erspread—

Right glad at heart, no further fear he knew,

But plunged in azure depths was lost to view.

No sooner vanished had the snake, than he

Revealed full clearly his divinity,

In kindly acts he played a filial part,

And with his grateful speeches touched my heart.

“Thou dearer than my parents didst restore

My life, true friend e’en to thy inmost core,

Through thee my former bliss has been regained,

Then come, Alara, see where once I reigned,

A dwelling stored with food, like Indra’s town

Masakkasara, place of high renown.”

The serpent-king, sire, after he had spoken these words, still further singing the praises of his dwelling place, repeated a couple of stanzas:

What charming spots in my domain are seen,

Soft to the tread and clothed in evergreen!

Nor dust nor gravel in our path we find,

And there do happy souls leave grief behind.

Midst level courts that sapphire walls surround

Fair mango groves on every side abound,

Whereon ripe clusters of rich fruit appear

Through all the changing seasons of the year.

Amidst these groves a fabric wrought of gold

And fixed with silver bolts thou mayst behold,

A dwelling bright in splendour, to outvie

The lightning flash that gleams athwart the sky.

Fashioned with gems and gold, divinely fair,

And decked with paintings manifold and rare,

'Tis thronged with nymphs magnificently dressed,

All wearing golden chains upon their breast.

Then in hot haste did Samkhapala climb

The terraced height, on which in power sublime

Uplifted on a thousand piers was seen

The palace of his wedded wife and queen.

Quickly anon one of that maiden band

Bearing a precious jewel in her hand,

A turquoise rare with magic power replete,

And all unbidden offered me a seat.

The snake then grasped my arm and led me where

There stood a noble and right royal chair,

“Pray, let your Honour sit here by my side,

As parent dear to me art thou,” he cried.

A second nymph then quick at his command

Came with a bowl of water in her hand,

And bathed my feet, kind service tendering

As did the queen for her dear lord the king.

Then yet another maiden in a trice

Served in a golden dish some curried rice,

Flavoured with many a sauce, that haply might

With dainty cravings tempt the appetite.

With strains of music then—for such they knew

Was their lord’s wish—they fain were to subdue

My will, nor did the king himself e’er fail

My soul with heavenly longings to assail.

Drawing nigh to me he thus repeated another stanza:

Three hundred wives, Alara, here have I,

Slim-waisted all, in beauty they outvie

The lotus flower. Behold, they only live

To do thy will: accept the boon I give.

Alara said:

One year with heavenly pleasures was I blest

When to the king this question I addressed,

“How, Naga, is this palace fair thy home,

And how to be thy portion did it come?

Was this fair place by accident attained,

Wrought by thyself, or gift from angels gained?

I ask thee, Naga king, the truth to tell,

How didst thou come in this fair place to dwell?”

Then followed stanzas uttered by the two alternately

’Twas by no chance or natural law attained,

Not wrought by me, no boon from angels gained;

But to my own good actions, thou must know,

And to my merits these fair halls I owe.

What holy vow, what life so chaste and pure

What store of merit could such bliss secure?

Tell me, O serpent-king, for I am fain

To know how this fair mansion thou couldst gain.

I once was king of Magadha, my name

Duyyodhana, a prince of mighty fame:

I held my life as vile and insecure,

Without all power in ripeness to mature.

I meat and drink religiously supplied,

And alms bestowed on all, both far and wide,

My house was like an inn, where all that came,

Sages and saints, refreshed their weary frame.

Bound by such vows, such was the life I passed,

And such the store of merit I amassed,

Whereby this mansion was at length attained,

And food and drink in ample measure gained.

This life, however bright for many a day

With dance and song, yet lasted not for aye,

Weak creatures harry thee for all thy might

And feeble beings put the strong to flight.

Why, armed to the teeth in such unequal fray,

To those vile beggars shouldst thou fall a prey?

By what o'ermastering dread wert thou undone?

Where had the virus of thy poison gone?

Why, armed to the teeth and powerful as thou wert,

From such poor creatures didst thou suffer hurt?

By no o'ermastering dread was I undone,

Nor could my powers be crushed by any one.

The worth of goodness is by all confessed;

Its bounds, like the sea shore, are ne'er transgressed.

Two times each moon I kept a holy day;

'Twas then, Alara, that there crossed my way

Twice eight lewd fellows, bearing in their hand

A rope and knotted noose of finest strand.

The ruffians pierced my nose, and through the slit

Passing the cord, dragged me along by it.

Such pain I had to bear—ah! cruel fate—

For holding holy days inviolate.

Seeing in that lone path, stretched at full length,

A thing of beauty and enormous strength,

“Why, wise and glorious one,” I cried, “dost thou

Take on thyself this strict ascetic vow?”

Neither for child nor wealth is my desire

Nor yet to length of days do I aspire;

But midst the world of men I fain would live,

And to this end heroically strive.

With hair and beard well-trimmed, thy sturdy frame

Adorned with gorgeous robes, an eye of flame,

Bathed in red sandal oil thou seemst to shine

Afar, e’en as some minstrel king divine.

With heavenly gifts miraculously blest

And of whate’er thy heart may crave possest,

I ask thee, serpent-king, the truth to tell,

Why dost thou in man’s world prefer to dwell?

Nowhere but in the world of men, I ween,

May purity and self-restraint be seen:

If only once midst men I draw my breath,

I’ll put an end to further birth and death.

Ever supplied with bountiful good cheer,

With thee, O king, I've sojourned for a year,

Now must I say farewell and flee away,

Absent from home no longer can I stay.

My wife and children and our menial band

Are ever trained to wait at thy command:

No one, I trust, has offered thee a slight

For dear art thou, Alara, to my sight.

Kind parents' presence fills a home with joy,

Yet more than they some fondly cherished boy:

But greatest bliss of all have I found here,

For thou, O king, hast ever held me dear.

I have a jewel rare with blood-red spot,

That brings great wealth to such as have it not.

Take it and go to thine own home, and when

Thou hast grown rich, pray, send it back again.

Alara, having spoken these words proceeded as follows: "Then, O sire, I addressed the serpent-king and said, "I have no need of riches, sir, but I am anxious to take orders," and having begged for everything requisite for the ascetic life, I left the Naga palace together with the king, and after sending him back I entered the Himalaya country and took orders." And after these words he delivered a religious discourse to the king of Benares and repeated yet another couple of stanzas:

Desires of man are transient, nor can they

The higher law of ripening change obey:

Seeing what woes from sinful passion spring,

Faith led me on to be ordained, O king.

Men fall like fruit, to perish straight away,

All bodies, young and old alike, decay:

In holy orders only find I rest,

The true and universal is the best.

On hearing this the king repeated another stanza:

The wise and learned, such as meditate

On mighty themes, we all should cultivate;

Hearkening, Alara, to the snake and thee,

Lo! I perform all deeds of piety.

Then the ascetic, putting forth his strength, uttered a concluding stanza:

The wise and learned, such as meditate

On mighty themes, we all should cultivate:

Hearkening, O monarch, to the snake and me,

Do thou perform all deeds of piety.

Thus did he give the king religious instruction, and after dwelling in the same spot four months of the rainy season he again returned to the Himalaya, and as long as he lived, cultivated the four Perfect States till he passed to the Brahma heaven, and Samkhapala, so long as he lived, observed holy days, and the king, after a life spent in charity and other good works, fared according to his deeds.

The Master at the end of this discourse identified the Birth: “At that time the father who became an ascetic was Kassapa, the king of Benares was Ananda, Alara was Sariputta and Samkhapala 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.

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