Ja 528 — Mahabodhi 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

“What mean, these things,” etc. This story the Master, while residing at Jetavana, told concerning the Perfection of Wisdom. The incident will be found related in the Mahaummagga. Now on this occasion the Master said, “Not now only, but formerly also, the Tathagata was wise and crushed all disputants,” and with these words he told a story of the past.

Once upon a time in the reign of Brahmadatta the Bodhisatta was born at Benares in the kingdom of Kasi, in the family of a North brahmin magnate, worth eighty crores, and they named him young Bodhi. When he came of age, he was instructed in all learning at Takkasila, and returning home he dwelt in the midst of household cares. By and bye renouncing evil desires he retired to the Himalaya region and took up the ascetic life of a wandering mendicant, and dwelt there for a long time, living on roots and wild berries. At the rainy season he came down from the Himalayas and going on his begging rounds he gradually approached Benares. There he took up his abode in the royal park, and on the following day going his round in the city for alms, in his character of a mendicant, he drew nigh to the palace gate. The king standing at his window saw him, and, being delighted with his calm demeanour, he introduced him into his palace and seated him on the royal couch. After a little friendly talk, the king listened to an exposition of the Law and then offered him a variety of dainty food. The Great Being accepted the food and thought, “Verily this king’s court is full of hatred and abounds in enemies. Who, I wonder, will rid me of a fear that has sprung up in my mind?” And observing a tawny hound, a favourite of the king’s, standing near him, he took a lump of food and made a show of wishing to give it to the dog. The king being aware of this had the dog’s dish brought and bade him take the food and give it to the dog. The Great Being did so and then finished his own meal. And the king, gaining his consent to the arrangement, had a hut of leaves built for him in the royal park within the city, and, assigning to him all that an ascetic required, he let him dwell there. And two or three times every day the king came to pay his respects to him. And at meal times the Great Being continued to sit on the royal couch and to share the royal food.

And so twelve years passed. Now the king had five councillors who taught him his temporal and spiritual duties. One of them denied the existence of Cause (Karma). Another believed everything was the act of a Supreme Being. A third professed the doctrine of previous actions. A fourth believed in annihilation at death. A fifth held the Kshatriya doctrine. He who denied the Cause taught the people that beings in this world were purified by rebirth. He who believed in the action of a Supreme Being taught that the world was created by him. He who believed in the consequences of previous acts taught that sorrow or joy that befalls man here is the result of some previous action. The believer in annihilation taught that no one passes hence to another world, but that this world is annihilated. He who professed the Kshatriya creed taught that one's own interest is to be desired even at the cost of killing one's parents. These men were appointed to sit in judgment in the king's court, and being greedy of bribes they dispossessed the rightful owner of property. Now one day a certain man, being worsted in a false action at law, saw the Great Being go into the palace for alms, and he saluted him and poured his grievance into his ears, saying, "Holy Sir, why do you, who take your meals in the king's palace, regard with indifference the action of his lord justices who by taking bribes ruin all men? Just now these five councillors, taking a bribe at the hands of a man who brought a false action, have wrongfully dispossessed me of my property." So the Great Being moved by pity for him went to the court, and giving a righteous judgment reinstated him in his property. The people with one consent loudly applauded his action. The king hearing the noise asked what it meant, and on being told what it was, when the Great Being had finished his meal, he took a seat beside him and asked, "Is it true, Reverend Sir, as they say, that you have decided a lawsuit?" "It is true, Sire." The king said, "It will be to the advantage of the people, if you decide cases: henceforth you are to sit in judgment." "Sire," he replied, "we are ascetics; this is not our business." "Sir, you ought to do it in pity to the people. You need not judge the whole day, but when you come here from the park, go at early dawn to the place of judgment and decide four cases; then return to the park and after partaking of food decide four more cases, and in this way the people will derive benefit." After being repeatedly importuned, he agreed to it and henceforth he acted accordingly. Those who brought fraudulent actions found no further opportunity, and the councillors not getting any bribes were in evil plight and thought, "Ever since this mendicant Bodhi began to sit in judgment, we get nothing at all." And calling him the king's enemy they said, "Come, let us slander him to the king and bring about his death." So drawing nigh to the king they said, "Sire, the mendicant Bodhi wishes you harm." The king did not believe them and said, " Nay, he is a good and learned man; he would not do so." "Sire," they replied, "all the citizens are his creatures: we are the only five people he cannot get under his thumb. If you do not believe us, when he next comes here, take note of his following." The king agreed to do so, and standing at his window he watched for his coming, and, seeing the crowd of suitors who followed Bodhi without his knowledge, the king thought they were his retinue, and being prejudiced against him he summoned his councillors and asked, "What are we to do?" "Have him arrested, Sire," they said. "Unless we see some gross offence on his part," he said, "how are we to arrest him?" "Well then diminish the honour that is usually paid to him, and when he sees this falling off of respect, being a wise mendicant, he will without saying a word to anyone run away of his own accord." The king fell in with this suggestion and gradually diminished the respect paid to him. On the first day after this they seated him on a bare couch. He noticed it and at once knew that he had

been slandered to the king, and returning to the park he was minded to take his departure that very day, but he thought, “When I know for certain, I will depart,” and he did not go away. So the next day when he was seated on the bare couch, they came with food prepared for the king and other food as well, and gave him a mixture of the two. On the third day they did not suffer him to approach the dais, but placing him at the head of the stairs they offered him mixed food. He took it and retiring to the park made his meal there. On the fourth day they placed him on the terrace below and gave him broth made of rice dust, and this too he took to the park and made his meal there. The king said, “Though the honours paid to him are diminished, yet Great Bodhi, the mendicant, does not go away. What are we to do?” “Sire,” they said, “it is not for alms he comes here; but he is seeking sovereignty. If he were coming merely for the alms, he would have run away the very first day he was slighted.” “What then are we to do?” “Have him slain tomorrow, Sire.” He said, “It is well,” and placing swords in the hands of these very men he said, “Tomorrow, when he comes and stands inside the door, cut off his head and make mincemeat of him, and without saying a word to anyone throw his body on a dunghill, and then take a bath and return here.”

They readily agreed and said, “Tomorrow we will come and do so,” and having arranged matters with one another they departed to their several homes. The king too after his evening meal lay down on the royal couch and called to mind the virtues of the Great Being. Then straightway sorrow fell upon him and the sweat poured from his body, and getting no comfort in his bed he rolled about from side to side. Now his chief queen lay beside him but he exchanged not a single word with her. So she asked him, saying, “How is it, Sire, that you do not say a word to me? Have I in any way offended you?” “No, lady,” he said, “but they tell me the mendicant Bodhi has become an enemy of ours. I have ordered five of my councillors to slay him tomorrow. After killing him they will cut him in pieces and cast his body on a dunghill. But for twelve years he has taught us many a truth. No single offence in him has ever been clearly seen by me before, but at the instigation of others I have ordered him to be put to death, and this is why I grieve.” Then she comforted him, saying, “. If, Sire, he is your enemy, why do you grieve at killing him? Your own safety must be attended to, even if the enemy you slay is your own son. Do not take it to heart.” He was reassured by her words and fell asleep. At that moment the well-bred tawny hound hearing the talk thought, “Tomorrow by my own power I must save this man’s life.” So early next morning the dog went down from the terrace and coming to the big door he lay with his head on the threshold, watching the road by which the Great Being came. But those councillors with swords in their hands came early in the morning and took their stand inside the door. And Bodhi duly observing the time came from the park and approached the palace door. Then the hound seeing him opened his mouth and showed his four big teeth and thought, “Why, holy Sir, do you not seek your alms elsewhere in India? Our king has posted five councillors armed with swords inside the door to slay you. Do not come accepting death as your fate, but be off with all speed,” and he gave a loud bark. From his knowledge of the meaning of all sounds Bodhi understood the matter and returned to the park and took everything that was necessary for his journey. But the king standing at his window, when he found he was not coming, thought, “If this man is my enemy, he will return to the park and gather together all his forces and will be prepared for action, but if otherwise, he will certainly take all that he requires and be ready to go

away. I will find out what he is about." And going to the park he found the Great Being coming out of his hut of leaves and with all his requisites at the end of his cloister walk, ready to start, and saluting him he stood on one side and uttered the first stanza:

What mean these things, umbrella, shoes, skin-robe and staff in hand?

What of this cloak and bowl and hook? I fain would understand

Why in hot haste thou wouldst depart and to what far-off land.

On hearing this the Great Being thought, "I suppose he does not understand what he has done. I will let him know." And he repeated two stanzas:

These twelve long years I've dwelt, O king, within thy royal park;

And never once before to-day this hound was known to bark.

To-day he shows his teeth so white, defiant now and proud,

And hearing what thou toldst the queen, to warn me, bays aloud.

Then the king acknowledged his sin, and asking to be forgiven he repeated the fourth stanza:

The sin was mine: thee, holy sir, my purpose was to slay;

But now I favour thee once more, and fain would have thee stay.

Hearing this the Great Being said, "Of a truth, Sire, wise men do not dwell with one who without having seen a thing with his own eyes follows the lead of others," and so saying he exposed his misconduct and spoke thus:

My food of old was pure and white, next motley 'twas in hue,

Now it is brown as brown can be. 'Tis time that I withdrew.

First on the dais, then upstairs and last below I dine;

Before I'm thrust out neck and crop, my place I will resign.

Affect thou not a faithless friend: like a dry well is he

However deep one digs it out, the stream will muddy be.

A faithful friend aye cultivate, a faithless one eschew,

As one athirst hastes to a pool, a faithful friend pursue.

Cling to the friend that clings to thee, his love with love requite;

One who forsakes a faithful friend is deemed a sorry wight.

Who cleaves not to a steadfast friend, nor love requites with love,

Vilest of men is he, nor ranks the monkey tribe above.

To meet too often is as bad as not to meet at all;

To ask a boon a whit too soon—this too makes love to pall.

Visit a friend but not too oft, nor yet prolong thy stay;

At the right moment favours beg: so love will ne'er decay.

Who stay too long find oftentimes that friend is changed to foe;

So ere I lose thy friendship I will take my leave and go.

The king said:

Though I with folded hands beseech, thou wilt not lend an ear,

Thou hast no word for us to whom thy service would be dear,

I crave one favour: come again and pay a visit here.

The Bodhisatta said:

If nothing comes to snap our life, O king, if thou and I

Still live, O fosterer of thy realm, perhaps I'll hither fly,

And we may see each other yet, as days and nights go by.

Thus spoke the Great Being and preached the Truth to the king, saying, "Be vigilant, O Sire." And leaving the park, after going a round for alms in a district of his own, he departed from Benares and by degrees reached a place in the Himalayas, and after dwelling some time there he descended from the hills and settled in a forest near a frontier village. As soon as he was gone, those councillors once more sat in judgment, robbing the people, and they thought, "Should Great Bodhi, the mendicant, return, we shall lose our livelihood. What are we to do to prevent his coming back?" Then this occurred to them: "Such people as these cannot leave any object to which they are attached. What can be the object here to which he is attached?" Then feeling sure it must be the king's chief consort, they thought, "This is the reason why he would return here. We

will be beforehand with them and put her to death." And they repeated this to the king, saying, "Sire, to-day a certain report is current in the city." "What report?" he said. "Great Bodhi the mendicant and the queen send messages to and fro, one to the other." "With what objects?" "His message to the queen, they say, is this, "Will you be able by your own power to put the king to death and to grant me the white umbrella?" Her message to him is, "The king's death, verily, is my charge: you are to come quickly." They constantly repeated this till the king believed it and asked, "What then is to be done?" They answered, "We must put the queen to death." And without investigating the truth of the matter he said, "Well then put her to death: and cutting up her body piecemeal throw it on the dunghill." They did so, and the news of her death was noised abroad throughout the city. Then her four sons said, "Our mother though innocent has been put to death by this man," and they became the king's enemies. And the king was greatly terrified. The Great Being in due course heard what had happened and thought, "Excepting myself there is no one that can pacify these princes and induce them to forgive their father; I will save the king's life and deliver these princes from their evil purpose." So next day he entered a frontier village and after eating the flesh of a monkey given to him by the inhabitants he begged for its skin which he had dried in his hermit's hut till it had lost all smell and then made it into an inner and outer robe which he laid upon his shoulder. Why did he do so? That he might say, "It is very helpful to me." Taking the skin with him he gradually made his way to Benares and drawing nigh to the young princes he said to them, "To murder one's own father is a terrible thing: you must not do this. No mortal is exempt from decay and death. I have come here to reconcile you; when I send a message, you are to come to me." After having thus exhorted the youths, he entered the park within the city and seated himself upon a stone slab, spreading the monkey-skin over it.

When the keeper of the park saw this, he went in haste to tell the king. The king on hearing it was filled with joy, and taking those councillors with him went and saluted the Great Being, and sitting down began to converse pleasantly with him. The Great Being without any exchange of friendly greeting went on stroking his monkey-skin. The king said, "Sir, without making any provision for me you continue to rub your monkey-skin. Is this more helpful to you than I am?" "Yes, Sire, this monkey is of the greatest service to me. I travelled about sitting on its back. It carried my water-pot for me. It swept out my dwelling-place. It performed various duties of a minor kind for me. Through its simplicity I ate its flesh and having had its skin dried I spread it out and sit and lie on it: so it is very useful to me." Thus did he, in order to refute these heretics, attribute the acts of a monkey to the monkey-skin, and with this object he spoke as he did. From his having formerly dressed in its skin he said, "I travelled about sitting on its back." From placing it on his shoulder and from having thus carried his drinking vessel he said, "It carried my drinking vessel." From the fact of having swept the ground with the skin he said, "It sweeps out my dwelling place." When he lies down, because his back is touched by this skin, and when he steps upon it, because it touches his feet, he says, "It performed such and such various duties for me": when he was hungry, because he took and ate its flesh, he says, "Being such a simple creature, I ate its flesh." On hearing this those councillors thought, "This man is guilty of murder. Consider, pray, the act of this ascetic: he says he killed a monkey, ate its flesh and goes about with its skin," and clapping their hands they ridiculed him. The Great Being, on seeing them do this, said, "These fellows do not know that I am come with this skin to refute their heresies:

I will not tell them." And addressing the one that denied the Cause, he asked, saying, "Why, sir, do you blame me?" "Because you have been guilty of an act of treachery to a friend and of murder." Then the Great Being said, "If one should believe in you and in your doctrine and act accordingly, what evil has been done?" And refuting his heresy he said:

If this thy creed, "All acts of men, or good or base,

From natural causes spring, I hold, in every case,"

Where in involuntary acts can sin find place?

If such the creed thou holdst and this be doctrine true,

Then was my action right when I that monkey slew.

Couldst thou but only see how sinful is thy creed,

Thou wouldst no longer then with reason blame my deed.

Thus did the Great Being rebuke him and reduce him to silence. The king, feeling annoyed at the rebuke before the assembly, collapsed and sat down. And the Great Being, after refuting his heresy, addressed the one who believed that everything is brought about by a Supreme Being and said, "Why, sir, do you blame me, if you really fall back upon the doctrine that everything is the creation of a Supreme Being?" And he repeated this verse.

If there exists some Lord all powerful to fulfil

In every creature bliss or woe, and action good or ill,

That Lord is stained with sin. Man does but work his will.

If such the creed thou holdst and this be doctrine true,

Then was my action right when I that monkey slew.

Couldst thou but only see how sinful is thy creed,

Thou wouldst no longer then with reason blame my deed.

Thus did he, like one knocking down a mango with a club stick taken from the mango tree, refute the man who believed in the action of some Supreme Being by his very own doctrine, and then he thus addressed the believer in all things having happened before, saying, "Why, sir, do you blame me if you believe in the truth of the doctrine that everything has happened before?" And he repeated this verse:

From former action still both bliss and woe begin;

This monkey pays his debt, to wit, his former sin:

Each act's a debt discharged. Where then does guilt come in?

If such the creed thou holdst and this be doctrine true,

Then was my action right when I that monkey slew.

Couldst thou but only see how sinful is thy creed,

Thou wouldst no longer then with reason blame my deed.

Having thus refuted the heresy of this man too, he turned to the believer in annihilation and said, "You, sir, maintain that there is no reward and the like, believing that all mortals suffer annihilation here, and that no one goes to a future world. Why then do you blame me?" And rebuking him he said:

Each living creature's form four elements compose;

To these component parts dissolved each body goes.

The dead exist no more, the living still live on;

Should this world be destroyed, both wise and fools are gone:

Amidst a ruined world guilt-stain defileth none.

If such the creed thou holdst and this be doctrine true,

Then was my action right when I that monkey slew.

Couldst thou but only see how sinful is thy creed,

Thou wouldst no longer then with reason blame my deed.

Thus did he refute the heresy of this one too and then addressing him who held the Kshatriya doctrine, he said, "You, sir, maintain that a man must serve his own interests, even should he have to kill his own father and mother. Why, if you go about professing this belief, do you blame me?" And he repeated this verse:

The Kshatriyas say, poor simple fools that think themselves so wise,

A man may kill his parents, if occasion justifies,

Or elder brother, children, wife, should need of it arise.

Thus did he withstand the views of this man too, and to reveal his own view he said:

“From off a tree beneath whose shade a man would sit and rest,

’Twere treachery to lop a branch. False friends we both detest.

But if occasion should arise, then extirpate that tree.”

That monkey then, to serve my needs, was rightly slain by me.

If such the creed thou holdst and this be doctrine true,

Then was my action right when I that monkey slew.

Couldst thou but only see how sinful is thy creed,

Thou wouldst no longer then with reason blame my deed.

Thus did he refute the doctrine of this man too, and now that all these five heretics were dumbfounded and bewildered, addressing the king he said, “Sire, these fellows with whom you go about are big thieves who plunder your realm. Oh! fool that you are, a man by consorting with fellows such as these both in this present world and that which is to come would meet with great sorrow,” and so saying he taught the king the Truth and said:

This man avers, “There is no cause.” Another, “One is Lord of all.”

Some hold, “Each deed was done of old.” Others, “All worlds to ruin fall.”

These and the Kshatriya heretics are fools who think that they are wise,

Bad men are they who sin themselves and others wickedly advise,

Evil communications aye result in pains and penalties.

Now by way of illustration, enlarging on the text of his sermon, he said:

A wolf disguised as ram of old

Drew unsuspected nigh the fold.

The panic-stricken flock it slew,

Then scampered off to pastures new.

Thus monks and brahmins often use

A cloak, the credulous to abuse.

Some on bare ground all dirty lie,

Some fast, some squat in agony.

Some may not drink, some eat by rule,

As saint each poses, wicked fool.

An evil race of men are they, and fools who think that they are wise,

All such not only sin themselves, but others wickedly advise,

Evil communications aye result in pains and penalties.

Who say, “No Force exists in anything,”

Deny the Cause of all, disparaging

Their own and others’ acts as vanity, O king,

An evil race of men are they, and fools who think that they are wise,

All such not only sin themselves, but others wickedly advise,

Evil communications aye result in pains and penalties.

If Force exists not anywhere nor acts be good or ill,

Why should a king keep artisans, to profit by their skill?

It is because Force does exist and actions good or ill,

That kings keep ever artisans and profit by their skill.

If for a hundred years or more no rain or snow should fall,

Our race, amidst a ruined world, would perish one and all.

But as rains fall and snow withal, the changing year ensures,

That harvest ripens and our land for ages long endures.

The bull through floods a devious course will take etc.

Who plucketh fruit before it has well ripened on the tree,

Destroys its seed and never knows how sweet the fruit may be.

So he that by unrighteous rule his country has destroyed,

The sweets that spring from righteousness has never once enjoyed.

But he that lets the fruit he plucks first ripen on the tree,

Preserves its seed and knows full well how sweet the fruit may be.

So he too by his righteous rule that has preserved the land,

How sweet the fruits of justice are can fully understand.

The warrior king that o'er the land unrighteous sway shall wield

Will suffer loss in plant and herb, whate'er the ground shall yield.

So should he spoil his citizens so apt by trade to gain,

A failing source of revenue will his exchequer drain.

And should he vex his soldiers bold, so skilled to rule the fight,

His army will fall off from him and shear him of his might.

So should he wrong or sage or saint, he meets his due reward,

And through his sin, howe'er high born, from heaven will be debarred.

And should a wife by wicked king, though innocent, be slain,

He suffers in his children and in hell is racked with pain.

Be just to town and country folk and treat thy soldiers well,

Be kind to wife and children and let saints in safety dwell.

A monarch such as this, O Sire, if free from passion found,

Like Indra, lord of Asuras, strikes terror all around.

The Great Being having thus taught the Truth to the king summoned the four young princes and admonished them, explaining to them the king's action, and he said, "Ask the king's pardon," and having persuaded the king to forgive them, he said, "Sire, henceforth do not accept the statement of slanderers without weighing their words, and be not guilty of any similar deed of violence, and as for you young princes, act not treacherously towards the king," and he thus admonished them all. Then the king said to him, "Holy Sir, it was owing to these men that I sinned against you and the queen, and through accepting their statement I wrought this evil deed. I will put all five of them to death." "Sire, you must

not do this." "Then I will order their feet and hands to be cut off." "This too you must not do." The king assented, saying, "It is well," and he stript them of all their property and disgracing them in various ways, by fastening their hair into five locks, by putting them into fetters and chains and by sprinkling cow-dung over them, he drove them out of his kingdom. And the Bodhisatta after staying there a few days and admonishing the king, bidding him be vigilant, set off for the Himalayas and developed supernatural power arising out of mystic meditation, and so long as he lived, cultivating the Perfect States, he became a denizen of the Brahma world.

The Master here ended his lesson and saying, "Not now only, Brethren, but formerly also, the Tathagata was wise and crushed all disputants," he thus identified the Birth: "At that time the five heretics were Purana Kassapa, Makkhali Gosala, Pakudha Kaccana, Ajita Kesakambali, Nigantha Nathaputta, the tawny dog was Ananda, and the wandering mendicant Mahabodhi was I myself.

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. 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.

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

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