Ja 529 — Sonaka 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

“A thousand crowns,” etc. This is a story told by the Master, while dwelling at Jetavana, concerning the Perfection of Renunciation. On this occasion the Bodhisatta sitting in the Hall of Truth in the midst of the Brethren, as they were singing the praises of the Perfection of Renunciation, said, “Brethren, not now only, but of old also the Tathagata verily left the world and made the Great Renunciation,” and so saying he related a story of the past.

Once upon a time, the Magadha king reigned in Rajagaha. The Bodhisatta was born to his chief queen and on his naming-day they called him prince Arindama. On the very day of his birth a son was also born to the royal chaplain, and to him they gave the name of young Sonaka. The two lads grew up together and when they were of age they were exceedingly handsome, in appearance not to be distinguished one from another, and they went to Takkasila and, after being trained in all sciences, they left that place with the intention of learning the practical uses of arts and local observances, and gradually in the course of their wanderings found their way to Benares. There they took up their abode in the royal park and next day entered the city. That very day certain men being minded to make an offering of food to brahmins provided some rice-porridge and arranged seats, and on seeing these youths approach they brought them into the house and made them sit upon the seats they had prepared. On the seat allotted to the Bodhisatta a white cloth was spread, on that assigned to Sonaka a red woollen rug. On seeing this omen Sonaka at once understood that this day his dear friend Arindama would become king in Benares, and that he would offer him the post of commander-in-chief. After they had finished their meal they returned together to the park. Now it was the seventh day since the king of Benares had died and the royal house was without an heir. So the councillors and the rest after washing themselves, head and all, assembled together and saying, “Thou art to go to the house of the man that is worthy to be king,” they started the festal car. On leaving the city it gradually approached the park and stopping at the park gate it stood there, ready for any one to mount upon it. The Bodhisatta lay, with his outer robe wrapped about his head, on

the royal slab of stone, while the lad Sonaka sat near him. On hearing the sound of musical instruments Sonaka thought, “Here comes the festal car for Arindama. To-day he will be made king and he will offer me the post of commander. But verily I have no desire for rule: when he is gone away, I will leave the world and become an ascetic,” and he stood on one side in concealment. The chaplain on entering the park saw the Great Being lying there and ordered his trumpets to be sounded. The Great Being woke up and after turning over and lying for a while he rose up and sat cross-legged on the stone seat. Then the chaplain spreading out his arms in a suppliant attitude cried, “The kingdom, Sire, comes to you.” “Why, is there no heir to the throne?” “Even so, Sire.” “Then it is well,” he said. So they sprinkled him to be king then and there. And mounting him on the car they brought him with a vast escort into the city. After a solemn procession round the city he ascended to his palace and in the greatness of his glory he forgot all about young Sonaka. But when the king was gone, Sonaka returned and sat on the stone seat, and so it was that a withered leaf of a sal tree fell from its stalk in front of him, and on seeing it he cried, “Even as this leaf, so will my body fall into decay,” and acquiring supernatural insight by reflecting on the impermanence of all things he attained to the state of a paccekabuddha, and at this very instant his characteristic as a layman vanished, and the marks of an ascetic became visible, and saying, “There is no more re-birth for me,” in the utterance of this aspiration he set out for the cave of Nandamula. And the Great Being after the lapse of forty years remembered Sonaka and said, “Where in the world can Sonaka be?” And time after time calling him to mind he found no one to tell him saying, “I have heard of him or I have seen him.” And sitting cross-legged on a royal throne upon a magnificent dais, surrounded by a company of minstrels and mime dancers, in the enjoyment of his glory, he said, “Whosoever shall hear from some one that Sonaka dwells in such and such a place and shall repeat it to me, to him I promise a hundred pieces of money, but whosoever shall see him with his own eyes and shall tell me, to him I promise a thousand pieces of money,” and giving expression to this inspired utterance, in the form of a song, he repeated the first stanza:

A thousand crowns for one that sees my friend and playmate dear.

A hundred lo! I give if one of Sonaka should hear.

Then a nautch girl, catching it up, as it were, from his very mouth, sang the words, and then another and another took it up till the whole harem, thinking it was a favourite air of the king’s, all sang it. And gradually both towns-people and country-folk sang the same song and the king too constantly sang it. At the end of fifty years the king had many sons and daughters, and the eldest son was called prince Dighavu. At this time the paccekabuddha Sonaka thought, “King Arindama is anxious to see me. I will go and explain to him the misery of evil desires and the blessing of Renunciation, and will show him the way to become an ascetic. And by his supernatural power he conveyed himself thither and took a seat in the park. At that moment a boy seven years old, wearing his hair in five knots, was sent there by his mother, and as he was gathering sticks in the park garden he sang over and over again this song. Sonaka called the boy to him and asked him saying, “Why, my lad, do you always sing the same song and never sing anything else? Do you not know any other song?” “I know others, holy Sir, but this is the king’s favourite song, and so

I constantly sing it." "Has any one been found to sing a refrain to this song?" "No, Sir." "I will teach you one and then you can go and sing the refrain before the king." "Yes, Sir." So he taught him the refrain "A thousand crowns" and the rest of it, and when the boy had mastered it, he sent him off, saying, "Go, my lad, and sing this refrain before the king and he will grant you great power. What have you to do with gathering sticks? Be off with you as quick as you can." "It is well," said the boy, and having mastered the refrain and saluted Sonaka he said, "Holy Sir, until I bring the king, do you remain here." With these words he went off as fast as he could to his mother and said to her, "Dear mother, give me a bath and dress me in my best clothes: to-day will I free you from your poverty." And when he had taken a bath and was smartly dressed, he went to the door of the palace and said, "Porter, go and tell the king and say, "A certain lad has come and even now stands at the door, prepared to sing a song with you." So the porter made haste and told the king. The king summoned him to his presence and said, "Friend, would you sing a song with me?" "Yes, Sire." "Then sing it." "My lord, I will not sing it here, but have a drum beaten through the city and bid the people assemble together. I will sing before the people." The king ordered this to be done, and, taking his seat in the middle of a couch under a magnificent pavilion and assigning a suitable seat to the boy, he said, "Now then sing your song." "Sire," he said, "you sing first and then I will sing a refrain to it." Then the king sang first, repeating this stanza:

A thousand crowns for one that sees my friend and playmate dear,

A hundred lo! I give if one of Sonaka should hear.

Then the Master, to make it clear that the boy with his hair dressed in five knots sang a refrain to the song begun by the king, in his Perfect Wisdom repeated two lines:

Then up and spake that little boy—five tangled locks he wore—

"The thousand give to me who saw, who heard a hundred more:

I'll tell thee news of Sonaka, thy playfellow of yore."

The verses that follow are to be taken in their obvious connexion.

Pray in what country, realm, or town hast thou a-wandering been,

And where was Sonaka, my friend, I prithee tell me, seen?

Within this realm, in thine own park is many a big sal tree

With leaves dark green and stems so straight, a pleasant sight to see;

Their branches densely interlaced, cloud-like, to heaven they rise,

And at their foot lo! Sonaka in meditation lies,

Filled with the Arhat’s holy calm, when human passion dies.

The king then started in full force and levelling the road

He made his way straight to the place of Sonaka’s abode.

There wandering midst an ample grove within his pleasure ground,

All passionless, in saintly bliss, his friend at rest he found.

Without saluting him he sat on one side and, by reason of his being himself given up to evil passion, he fancied he was some poor wretch and addressed him in this stanza:

His parents dead, with shaven head, clad in monk’s robe I see

A wretched Brother in a trance, stretched here beneath this tree.

On hearing this said Sonaka, “He is no wretched wight

Who in his every action, Sire, has aye attained to right.

Nay rather wretched those who right neglect and practise ill,

For evil doer evil doom is destined to fulfil.”

Thus did he rebuke the Bodhisatta, and he pretending not to know he was being rebuked, talking in a friendly way with him, declared his name and family and spoke this stanza:

As king of Kasi I am known, Arindama my name,

Since coming here, Sir, hast thou met with aught deserving blame?

Then the paccekabuddha said, “Not merely while dwelling here but nowhere else have I met with any discomfort,” and he began to tell in verse the blessings of the monk:

’Mongst blessings of poor homeless monk I ever count it one,

In jar or maund or granary he stores has hoarded none,

But only craves what others leave and lives content thereon.

The next of all his blessings this is one deserving praise,

He free from blame enjoys his food and no one him gainsays.

Third blessing of the monk I hold is this, that all his days

He eats his food in happiness and no one him gainsays.

The fourth of all his blessings is that wheresoe'er he goes,

He wanders free throughout the realm and no Attachment knows.

Fifth blessing this that should the town, wherever he may be,

Perish in flames, he suffers not, for nought to burn has he.

The sixth of all the blessings he may reckon to his lot

That if the realm should be despoiled, he suffers not a jot.

The seventh of the blessings that to poverty he owes,

Though robbers should his path beset, and many dangerous foes,

With bowl and robe the holy man ever in safety goes.

Last blessing this that wheresoe'er our wanderer may fare,

Homeless and poor, he journeys on without regret or care.

Thus did the paccekabuddha Sonaka tell of the eight blessings of the monk, and even beyond this he could have told of a hundred, nay a thousand immeasurable blessings, but the king being given up to sensual desires cut short his speech, saying, "I have no need of monkish blessings," and to make it clear how devoted he was to evil passions he said:

Thy many blessings thou mayst praise but what am I to do

Who worldly pleasures, Sonaka, so greedily pursue?

Dear are all human joys to me and heavenly joys as well,

But how to gain both worlds at once, to me, I prithee, tell.

Then the paccekabuddha answered him:

Who greedily on pleasure bent their worldly lusts would sate,

Work wickedness awhile, to be re-born in woeful state.

But they who leave desire behind through life all fearless go,

And reaching concentration pure are ne'er re-born to woe.

Here tell I thee a parable; Arindama, give heed,

Some that are wise through parable my meaning best may read.

See! borne along on Ganges' flooded tide a carcase vast,

A foolish crow thought to himself as it was floating past,

"Oh what a carriage I have found and goodly store of food,

Here will I stay both night and day, enjoying blissful mood."

So eats he flesh of elephant and drinks from Ganges' stream,

And budging not sees grove and shrine pass by him in a dream.

Thus heedless and on carrion vile so all intent was he,

The Ganges swept him headlong to the perils of the sea.

But when with food exhausted he, poor bird, essayed a flight,

Nor east nor west nor south nor north was any land in sight.

Far out at sea, so weak was he, long ere he reached the shore,

Midst countless perils of the deep he fell to rise no more.

For crocodiles and monster fish, where our poor flutterer lay,

Came ravening all around and quick devoured their quivering prey.

So thou and all that greedily pleasures of sense pursue

Are deemed as wise as was this crow, till ye all lusts eschew.

My parable proclaims the Truth. To it, O king, give heed,

Thy fame for good or ill will grow according to thy deed.

. Thus by means of this parable did he admonish the king and, in order to fix it firmly in his mind, he repeated this stanza:

In pity once, nay even twice, utter the warning word,

But keep not on repeating it, like slave before his lord.

Thus in his wisdom infinite did Sonaka the seer

Instruct the king, and then in space straightway did disappear.

This stanza was inspired by Perfect Wisdom.

And the Bodhisatta stood gazing on him as he passed through the air, so long as he remained within the range of his vision, but when he had passed out of sight, he was greatly agitated and thought, "This brahmin, low-born fellow that he is, after scattering the dust from his feet upon my head, though I am sprung from an unbroken line of nobles, has disappeared in the sky: I must to-day renounce the world and become a religious. So in his desire to join the religious and give up his kingdom he repeated a couple of stanzas:

Where are my charioteers, despatched a worthy king to find?

I would not longer reign; henceforth my crown I have resigned.

Tomorrow one may die, who knows? I'll be ordained to-day;

Lest, like the foolish crow, I fall 'neath passion's baneful sway.

On hearing him thus abdicate his throne his councillors said:

Thou hast a son, Dighavu named, a goodly prince is he,

By sprinkling raise him to the throne, for he our king shall be.

Then, beginning with the stanza spoken by the king, the verses in due order are to be understood in their obvious connexion:

Then quickly bring Dighavu here, a goodly prince is he,

By sprinkling raise him to the throne, for he your king shall be.

When they had brought Dighavu there, their nursing king to be,

His sire addressed his darling boy—an only son was he.

Full sixty thousand villages I once did claim as mine,

Take them, my son, to thee henceforth my kingdom I resign.

Tomorrow one may die, who knows? I'll be ordained to-day;

Lest, like the foolish crow, I fall 'neath passion's baneful sway.

Lo! sixty thousand elephants with splendour all bedight,

With girths of gold, caparisoned with trappings golden-bright,

Each ridden by his own mahout, with spiked hook in hand,

Take them, my son, I give them thee as ruler of the land.

Tomorrow one may die, who knows? I'll be ordained to-day;

Lest, like the foolish crow, I fall 'neath passion's baneful sway.

Lo! sixty thousand horses here, bedecked in bright array

—Sindh horses, all of noble breed and fleet of foot are they—

Each ridden by a henchman bold, with sword and bow in hand,

Take them, my son, I give them thee as ruler of the land.

Tomorrow one may die, who knows? I'll be ordained to-day;

Lest, like the foolish crow, I fall 'neath passion's baneful sway.

Lo! sixty thousand cars all yoked, with banners flying free,

With tiger skin and panther hide, a gorgeous sight to see,

Each driven by mailed charioteers, all armed with bow in hand,

Take them, my son, I give them thee, as ruler of the land.

Tomorrow one may die, who knows? I'll be ordained to-day;

Lest, like the foolish crow, I fall 'neath passion's baneful sway.

Lo! sixty thousand kine so red, with bulls on every hand,

Take them, my son, I give them thee as ruler of the land.

Tomorrow one may die, who knows? I'll be ordained to-day;

Lest, like the foolish crow, I fall 'neath passion's baneful sway.

Here twice eight thousand maidens fair in goodly vesture stand,

With many a jewelled bracelet decked and rings upon each hand,

Take them, my son, I give them thee, as ruler of the land.

Tomorrow one may die, who knows? I'll be ordained to-day;

Lest, like the foolish crow, I fall 'neath passion's baneful sway.

They say to me, "Thy mother dear, alas! poor boy, is dead,"

I cannot live without thee too. All joy from life is fled.

As close behind old elephant a young one oft is found

Moving through mountain-pass or wood, o'er rough or level ground,

So bowl in hand I'll follow thee, wherever thou mayst lead,

Nor shalt thou find me burdensome or difficult to feed.

As oft some ship of merchants seeking gain at any cost

Is swallowed by a whirlpool and both ship and crew are lost,

So lest I find a stumbling-block in this accursed boy,

Instal him in my palace there all pleasures to enjoy—

With maids whose hands caressing him with gleaming gold are bright,

Like Sakka midst his nymphs divine, he'll ever take delight.

Then brought they prince Dighavu to the palace, home of joy,

And seeing him these maidens fair addressed the royal boy.

"Who art thou? Angel, minstrel-god, or Sakka known to fame,

Dispensing alms in every town? We fain would learn thy name."

No angel I nor minstrel-god nor Sakka known to fame,

But heir to king of Kasi, prince Dighavu is my name.

So cherish me and happy be: each one as wife I claim.

Then thus unto Dighavu, their liege lord, these maidens said;

"Where has the king a refuge gained, and whither is he fled?"

The king escaped from miry ways is safe upon dry ground,

From thorns and jungle free at last the high road he has found.

But I am set upon a path that leads to woeful state,

Through thorns and jungle on I press to reach an awful fate.

Welcome to us, as lion is to cubs in mountain lair,

Bear sway henceforth, our sovereign lord, the true and rightful heir.

And having so spoken they all sounded their musical instruments and all manner of song and dance took place, and so great was his glory that the prince intoxicated by it forgot all about his father, but exercising his rule with justice he fared according to his deeds. But the Bodhisatta developed the supernatural faculty resulting from Meditation and passed away to the Brahma world.

The Master here ended his lesson and said, “Not now only, Brethren, but also of old the Tathagata verily made the Great Renunciation,” and he identified the Birth, saying, “At that time the paccekabuddha obtained Nirvana, the son was the young Rahula, and king Arindama 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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