Ja 72 — Silavanaga Jātaka

English translation by Robert Chalmers.

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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

“Ingratitude lacks more.”—This story was told by the Master while at the Bamboo-grove about Devadatta. The Brethren sat in the Hall of Truth, saying, “Sirs, Devadatta is an ingrate and does not recognise the virtues of the Blessed One.” Returning to the Hall, the Master asked what topic they were discussing, and was told. “This is not the first time, Brethren,” said he, “that Devadatta has proved an ingrate; he was just the same in bygone days also, and he has never known my virtues.” And so saying, at their request he told this story of the past.

Once on a time when Brahmadatta was reigning in Benares, the Bodhisatta was conceived by an elephant in the Himalayas. When born, he was white all over, like a mighty mass of silver. Like diamond balls were his eyes, like a manifestation of the five brightnesses; red was his mouth, like scarlet cloth; like silver flecked with red gold was his trunk; and his four feet were as if polished with lac. Thus his person, adorned with the ten perfections, was of consummate beauty. When he grew up, all the elephants of the Himalayas in a body followed him as their leader. Whilst he was dwelling in the Himalayas with a following of 80,000 elephants, he became aware that there was sin in the herd. So, detaching himself from the rest, he dwelt in solitude in the forest, and the goodness of his life won him the name of Good King Elephant.

Now a forester of Benares came to the Himalayas, and made his way into that forest in quest of the implements of his craft. Losing his bearings and his way, he roamed to and fro, stretching out his arms in despair and weeping, with the fear of death before his eyes. Hearing the man’s cries, the Bodhisatta was moved with compassion and resolved to help him in his need. So he approached the man. But at sight of the elephant, off ran the forester in great terror. Seeing him run away, the Bodhisatta stood still, and this brought the man to a standstill too. Then the Bodhisatta again advanced, and again the forester ran away, halting once more when the Bodhisatta halted. Hereupon the truth dawned on the man that the elephant stood still when he himself ran, and only advanced when he

himself was standing still. Consequently he concluded that the creature could not mean to hurt, but to help him. So he valiantly stood his ground this time. And the Bodhisatta drew near and said, “Why, friend man, are you wandering about here lamenting?”

“My lord,” replied the forester, “I have lost my bearings and my way, and fear to perish.”

Then the elephant brought the man to his own dwelling, and there entertained him for some days, regaling him with fruits of every kind. Then, saying, “Fear not, friend man, I will bring you back to the haunts of men,” the elephant seated the forester on his back and brought him to where men dwelt. But the ingrate thought to himself, that, if questioned, he ought to be able to reveal everything. So, as he travelled along on the elephant’s back, he noted the landmarks of tree and hill. At last the elephant brought him out of the forest and set him down on the high road to Benares, saying, “There lies your road, friend man: Tell no man, whether you are questioned or not, of the place of my abode.” And with this leave-taking, the Bodhisatta made his way back to his own abode.

Arrived at Benares, the man came, in the course of his walks through the city, to the ivory-workers’ bazaar, where he saw ivory being worked into divers forms and shapes. And he asked the craftsmen whether they would give anything for the tusk of a living elephant.

“What makes you ask such a question?” was the reply. “A living elephant’s tusk is worth a great deal more than a dead one’s.”

“Oh, then, I’ll bring you some ivory,” said be, and off he set for the Bodhisatta’s dwelling, with provisions for the journey, and with a sharp saw. Being asked what had brought him back, he whined out that he was in so sorry and wretched a plight that he could not make a living anyhow. Wherefore, he had come to ask for a bit of the kind elephant’s tusk to sell for a living! “Certainly; I will give you a whole tusk,” said the Bodhisatta, “if you have a bit of a saw to cut it off with.” “Oh, I brought a saw with me, sir.” “Then saw my tusks off, and take them away with you,” said the Bodhisatta. And he bowed his knees till he was couched upon the earth like an ox. Then the forester sawed off both of the Bodhisatta’s chief tusks! When they were off, the Bodhisatta took them in his trunk and thus addressed the man, “Think not, friend man, that it is because I value not nor prize these tusks that I give them to you. But a thousand times, a hundred-thousand times, dearer to me are the tusks of omniscience which can comprehend all things. And therefore may my gift of these to you bring me omniscience.” With these words, he gave the pair of tusks to the forester as the price of omniscience.

And the man took them off, and sold them. And when he had spent the money, back he came to the Bodhisatta, saying that the two tusks had only brought him enough to pay his old debts, and begging for the rest of the Bodhisatta’s ivory. The Bodhisatta consented, and gave up the rest of his ivory after having it cut as before. And the forester went away and sold this also. Returning again, he said, “It’s no use, my lord; I can’t make a living anyhow. So give me the stumps of your tusks.”

“So be it,” answered the Bodhisatta; and he lay down as before. Then that vile wretch, trampling upon the trunk of the Bodhisatta, that sacred trunk which was like corded silver, and clambering upon the future Buddha’s temples, which were as the snowy crest of Mount Kelasa,—kicked at the roots of the tusks till he had cleared the flesh away. Then he sawed out the stumps and went his way. But scarce had the wretch passed out of the sight of the Bodhisatta, when the solid earth, inconceivable in its vast extent, which can support the mighty weight of Mount Sineru and its encircling peaks, with all the world’s unsavoury filth and ordure, now burst asunder in a yawning chasm,—as though unable to bear the burthen of all that wickedness! And straightway flames from nethermost Hell enveloped the ingrate, wrapping him round as in a shroud of doom, and bore him away. And as the wretch was swallowed up in the bowels of the earth, the Tree-fairy that dwelt in that forest made the region echo with these words—“Not even the gift of worldwide empire can satisfy the thankless and ungrateful!” And in the following stanza the Fairy taught the Truth—

Ingratitude lacks more, the more it gets;

Not all the world can glut its appetite.

With such teachings did the Tree-fairy make that forest re-echo. As for the Bodhisatta, he lived out his life, passing away at last to fare according to his deserts.

Said the Master, “This is not the first time, Brethren, that Devadatta has proved an ingrate; he was just the same in the past also.” His lesson ended, he identified the Birth by saying, “Devadatta was the ungrateful man of those days, Sariputta the Tree-fairy, and I myself Good King Elephant.”

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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