

Jātaka Tales of the Buddha

Part V

retold by

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Nalāpāna Jātaka

The Case of the Hollow Canes

Jātaka No. 20

BUDDHA told this story while journeying through Kosala. When he came to the village of Nalākapāna (Cane-drink Village), he stayed near the Nalākapāna Lake. One day, after bathing in the pool, the monks asked the novices to fetch them some canes for needle-cases. After getting the canes, however, the monks discovered that, rather than having joints like common canes, the canes were completely hollow.

Surprised, they went to Buddha and said, “Venerable Sir, we wanted to make needle-cases out of these canes, but from top to bottom they are quite hollow. How can that be?”

“Monks,” said Buddha, “this was my doing in days gone by.” Then he told this story of the past.

Long, long ago, on this spot there was a lake, surrounded by a thick forest. In those days the Bodhisatta was born as the king of the monkeys. As large as the fawn of a red deer, he was the wise leader of eighty thousand monkeys that lived in that forest.

He carefully counseled his followers: “My friends, in this forest there are trees that are poisonous and lakes that are haunted by ogres. Remember always to ask me first before eating any fruit you have not eaten before or drinking any water from a source you have not drunk from before.”

“Certainly,” the monkeys agreed.

One day while roaming the jungle, the monkey troop came to an area they had never before visited. Thirsty after their day’s wanderings, they searched for water and found this beautiful lake. Remembering their master’s warning, the monkeys refrained from drinking. They sat and waited for their leader. When he joined them he asked, “Well, my friends, why don’t you drink?”

“We waited for you to come.”

“Well done!” said the monkey king. Then he walked a full circuit around the lake. He noticed that all the footprints led down into the water, but none came back.

“My friends,” he announced, “you were right not to drink from this lake. It is undoubtedly haunted by a demon.”

Suddenly, the ogre, in a hideous guise, rose up out of the lake and appeared before them. He had a blue belly, a white face, and bright-red hands and feet. “Why are you sitting here?” he asked the monkeys. “Go down to the lake and drink.”

The monkey king asked him, “Aren’t you the ogre of this lake?”

“Yes, I am. How did you know I was here?”

“I saw the footprints leading down to the water but none returning. Do you

prey on all those who go down to the water?”

“Yes, I do. From small birds to the largest animals, I catch everything which has come into my water. I will eat all of you too!”

“Oh, no, ogre,” said the monkey king, “we are not going to let you eat us.”

“You must be parched. Just drink the water,” taunted the monster.

“All right, ogre, we will drink some water, but we are not going to fall into your power.”

“How can you drink water without entering the lake?”

“Ogre!” the monkey king cried. “We need not enter your lake at all. All eighty thousand of us can drink through these canes as easily as through a hollow lotus stalk. We will drink and you will not be able to harm us.”

The monkey king requested that a cane be brought to him. Then, recollecting the Ten Pāramitās he was perfecting, he recited them in a solemn asseveration of truth, and blew into the cane.

Instantly, the joints disappeared, and the whole length of the cane became hollow. After hollowing several more in the same way, the monkey king toured the lake. “Let all canes growing here become perfectly hollow throughout,” he commanded. Because of the great virtues of Bodhisattas, their commands are always fulfilled. Therefore, every single cane that grew around that lake instantly became hollow and has always remained so.

(There are four miraculous phenomena which will endure throughout the whole *kappa* [eon]. What are the four? First, the figure of the hare can be seen in the moon [Jātaka 316]; second, fire will not touch the spot of the baby quail’s nest [Jātaka 35]; third, no rain shall fall on the site of Ghaṭikāra’s house [Ghaṭikāra Sutta, Majjhima Nikāya 81]; and fourth, the canes that grow round this lake will remain perfectly hollow.)

At last, the monkey king seated himself with a cane in his hands. The other eighty thousand monkeys likewise arranged themselves around the lake, each with a cane. They all dipped their canes into the water and drank. They satisfied their thirst, but the ogre could not touch a single one of them. Frustrated and furious, he returned to his home in defeat.

When all had finished, the monkey king led his followers back into the forest.

When Buddha had ended his lesson, he showed the connection, and identified the Birth by saying, “Devadatta was the water-ogre of those days; my disciples were the eighty thousand monkeys; and I was the monkey-king, so fertile in resourcefulness.”

Vatṭaka Jātaka

The Baby Quail

Jātaka No. 35

WHILE he was on tour through Magadha, Buddha told this story about the extinguishing of a forest fire.

One day, Buddha went on his morning round for alms through a hamlet in Magadha. After finishing his meal, he went out again accompanied by a large group of bhikkhus. Some monks walked ahead of Buddha, and some walked behind him. While they were on their way, a great forest fire broke out, raging fiercely and spreading rapidly, until the jungle was a roaring wall of flames and smoke.

Those monks who had not yet made attainments were terrified with the fear of death. “Let us set a counter fire so the jungle fire cannot reach us over the ground we have burned,” they cried, and immediately started to kindle a fire.

“What are you doing?” asked the other monks. “You are blind to the sun rising in front of your eyes. Here you are, journeying along with Buddha who is without equal, but still you cry, ‘Let us make a counter fire!’ You do not know the might of a Buddha! Come with us to the Teacher.”

All the monks gathered around Buddha who had halted as soon as he had seen the flames. The blaze whirled and roared as if to devour them. Suddenly, however, when the fire was exactly sixteen lengths from the spot where Buddha stood, the flames went out like a torch plunged into water, extinguished and completely harmless.

The monks burst into praises of Buddha, “Oh, how great are the virtues of the Teacher! Even fire can not singe the spot where Buddha stands!”

“It is no present power of mine,” Buddha told them, “that makes the fire go out as soon as it reaches this spot. It is the power of a former Act of Truth of mine. No fire will ever burn this spot during the whole of this world age. This is one of the miracles which will last until the end of this era.”

The Elder Ānanda then folded a robe in fourths and laid it down for Buddha to sit on. After he had taken his seat, the monks bowed to him and seated themselves respectfully around him. “Only the present is known to us, Sir. The past is hidden,” they said. “Please make it clear to us.” At their request, the Buddha told this story of the past.

Long, long ago in this very spot the Bodhisatta was reborn as a quail. Every day, his parents fed him with food which they brought in their beaks, since he was still confined to the nest and unable to forage on his own. The baby quail did not even have the strength yet to stand on his feet to walk about, much less to spread his wings and fly.

One day, a great jungle fire broke out. (At that time also, this area of Magadha was ravaged by fire every year in the dry season.) As the flames swept through

the grass and the forest, birds and animals fled for their lives. The air was filled with the shrieking of adult birds flying away from their nests. The parents of this young bird were as frightened as the others and abandoned their helpless offspring to his fate. Lying there in the nest, the little quail stretched his neck to see what was happening. When he saw the flames coming toward him, he thought to himself, "My parents, fearing death, have fled to save themselves, leaving me here completely alone. I am without protector or helper. Had I the power to take to my wings, I too would fly to safety. If I could use my legs, I would run away. What can I do?"

"In this world," he thought further, "there exists the Power of Goodness and the Power of Truth. There are beings who, having realized all the Perfections in previous lives, have attained enlightenment beneath the Bodhi tree. They have become Buddhas, filled with truth, compassion, mercy, and patience. There is power in the attributes they have won. Although I am very young and very weak, I can grasp one truth that is the single principle in Nature. As I call to mind the Buddhas of the past and the power of their attributes, let me perform an Act of Truth."

The little quail concentrated his mind by recalling the power of the Buddhas long since passed away and declared, "With wings that cannot fly and legs that cannot yet walk, forsaken by my parents, here I lie. By this truth and by the faith that is in me, I call on you, O dreadful Fire, to turn back, harming neither me nor any of the other birds!"

At that instant, the fire retreated sixteen lengths and went out like a torch plunged in water, leaving a circle thirty-two lengths in diameter around the baby quail perfectly unscathed.

From that time on, that very spot has escaped being touched by fire, and so it will continue to be throughout this entire era. When his life ended, the quail who had performed this Act of Truth, passed away to fare according to his deserts.

"Thus monks," said the Master, "it is not my present power but the efficacy of that Act of Truth performed by me as a young quail, that has made the flames spare this spot in the jungle."

At the end of his lesson Buddha preached the Truths. Some of the monks who heard attained the First path, some the Second, some the Third, and some became Arahats. Then Buddha showed the connection and identified the Birth by saying, "My present parents were the parents of those days, and I myself the little quail who became king of the quails."

Pañcāvudha Jātaka

Prince Five-Weapons

Jātaka No. 55

BUDDHA told this story while at Jetavana monastery, about a monk who had stopped making effort. Asked if it was true that he was a backslider, the monk immediately admitted it was so.

“In bygone days, bhikkhu,” Buddha told him, “the wise and good won a throne by sheer perseverance in the hour of need.”

Then he told this story of the past.

Long, long ago when Brahmadata was reigning in Bārāṣasī, the Bodhisatta was reborn to his queen. On the day he was to be named, his royal parents gave a feast for eight hundred brahmans. After the meal, they asked the brahmans what their son’s destiny would be. Noting that the child showed promise of a glorious destiny, the soothsayers predicted that the child would become a mighty king endowed with every virtue. Winning fame through exploits with his five weapons, he would be without equal in all Jambudvīpa (India). Because of the brahmans’ prophecy, the king and queen named their son Prince Five-Weapons.

When the prince was sixteen years old, the king gave him a thousand pieces of silver and sent him to study with a famous teacher in Takkaṣīla, a city in Gandhāra. The prince studied there for several years. When he had mastered all his subjects, the teacher presented him with a set of five weapons. The prince paid his respects to his master and left Takkaṣīla to return to Bārāṣasī.

On his way the prince came to a dense jungle. Some men who were camped at the edge of the jungle tried to stop him from going on. “Young man,” they warned, “do not try to go through that forest. It is the haunt of a formidable ogre named Shaggy-grip who kills everyone who enters his territory.”

Confident of his own strength, the prince was undaunted, but, sure enough, in the middle of the jungle, the hairy ogre confronted him. The monster made himself as tall as a palm-tree, with a head as big as a gazebo, eyes like mixing bowls, two sharp tusks, and a hawk-like beak. His distended belly was purple, and the palms of his hands were blue-black.

“Where do you think you’re going?” cried the monster. “Stop! You are mine!”

“Ogre,” answered the prince calmly, “You do not scare me. Do not come near me, or I will kill you with a poisoned arrow!”

Bravely, the prince fitted an arrow dipped in deadly poison to his bow. He shot it at the monster, but it only stuck to the creature’s scruffy coat. The youth shot all fifty of his arrows, one after another, but they all stuck to the ogre’s unkempt fur.

Shaking himself, so that the arrows fell harmlessly at his feet, the ogre gave a

roar and charged the prince. The young prince shouted defiance, drew his sword, and struck at the ogre, but, like the arrows, the sword merely got caught in the demon's shaggy hair. Next the prince hurled his spear, but that, too, lodged in the demon's thick pelt. He struck the ogre with his club, but the club joined the other weapons in sticking to the creature's fur.

The prince maintained his stance, "Ogre, you have never before heard of me. I am Prince Five-Weapons. When I entered this forest, however, I put my trust not in these weapons—bow arrows, sword, spear, and club—but in myself! Now will I give you a blow which will crush you to smithereens." The prince hit the demon with his right fist, but his hand stuck fast to the hair. Next he aimed a blow with his left hand. He kicked the ogre with his right foot, and with his left. All he accomplished, however, was to get himself stuck to the monster with both hands and both feet.

"I will crush you to atoms!" he shouted, as he butted the ogre with his head, but that too stuck fast.

Though completely ensnared by all four limbs and his head, hanging helplessly like a doll from the ogre's coat, the prince remained fearless and undaunted.

The monster reflected, "This is a hero without equal, a lion among men. He cannot be an ordinary human being! Although he has been captured by an ogre like me, he shows no sign of fear. In all the time I've been killing travelers in this jungle, I have never seen anyone like him. Why isn't he afraid of me?"

Reluctant to devour the prince, the ogre asked, "How can it be, young prince, that you have no fear of death?"

"Why should I be afraid? Each life must surely end in death. I know that inside my body there is a diamond sword which not even you can digest. If you eat me, this sword will chop your innards into mincemeat. My death will bring about yours." Of course, the prince was referring to the adamantite Sword of Knowledge.

The ogre pondered on this. "This young prince speaks only the truth. Surely I would not be able digest a morsel of such a hero. I had better release him." Fearful for his own life, the demon let the prince go free, saying, "Brave youth, I will not eat you. Go free to gladden the hearts of your kinsfolk, your friends, and your country."

"I am free to go, and I will go, ogre," answered the prince, "but the sins you committed in a past life have caused you to be reborn as a murderous fiend. If you continue your evil ways, you will go from darkness to darkness. Having met me, however, you have the chance to stop killing. To destroy life is to ensure rebirth in hell, as a brute, or as a hungry spirit. Even if a killer's rebirth is as a human, it will be miserable and short."

The prince taught the ogre the evil consequences of violating the moral precepts and explained the blessings that follow from observing them. Having converted the monster, the prince imbued him with self-discipline and established him in the Five Precepts.

Before continuing on his way, the prince made the ogre the guardian of that forest, with a right to levy dues, and charged him to remain steadfast. As he

passed through the villages at the forest's edge, he announced to everyone that the ogre was completely reformed.

Finally, armed with his five weapons, the prince returned to the city of Bārāṇasī and was reunited with his parents.

When he at last became king, he was a righteous ruler. After a life spent in charity and other good works, he passed away to fare according to his deserts.

His lesson ended, Buddha said, "Without attachments to hamper one's heart, victory will be achieved by walking righteously."

Buddha taught the Dhamma progressively, until that monk won Arahatship. Then he showed the connection, and identified the Birth by saying, "Aṅgulimāla was the ogre of those days, and I myself was Prince Five-Weapons."

Alīnacitta Jātaka

The Elephant Who Saved a Kingdom

Jātaka No. 156

ONE day, while Buddha was staying at Jetavana, a bhikkhu came to him and confessed that he was weak-hearted. Buddha encouraged him, saying, “Monk, in bygone days you won the entire kingdom of Bārāṇasī and presented it to a tiny baby boy. You did it by sheer determination. Now that you have embraced this great discipline leading to liberation, how could you possibly lose heart?” Then he told this story of the past.

Long, long ago, when Brahmadata was king of Bārāṇasī there was a village of carpenters who earned their livelihood by building houses. Every day they took a boat upriver and went into the forest. There they cut trees and shaped beams and timbers for houses. Then they numbered all the pieces to be put together into a frame. Taking all the lumber back to the river, they loaded it on the boat and returned to town. They were very skillful at their work and earned substantial wages.

One day, near their jungle workplace, an elephant stepped on a splinter of acacia wood. The splinter pierced the elephant’s foot, which began to swell and fester, causing him terrible agony. When the elephant heard the carpenters cutting wood, he thought, “Perhaps those carpenters can cure my foot.” Limping with pain, he approached them and lay down. At first, the carpenters were very surprised at this, but, noticing his swollen foot, they looked closely and discovered the splinter. With a sharp tool they made an incision around the splinter, fastened a string to it, and pulled it out. Then they lanced the wound, cleaned it thoroughly with warm water, and wrapped it in clean bandages. In a short time the elephant’s foot had healed completely.

Grateful to the carpenters for having saved his life, the elephant decided to repay them by helping them with their work. From that time on, he pulled up trees and rolled logs for them. Whenever the carpenters needed tools, he picked them up with his trunk and took them to where they were working. At lunchtime, the carpenters brought food to the elephant, so that he didn’t have to forage.

After some time, the elephant realized that he was getting old and would not be able to continue serving the carpenters much longer. One day he brought his son, a magnificent, well-bred white elephant. He said to the carpenters, “This young elephant is my son. Since you saved my life, I give him to you. From now on, he will work for you.” After he had explained all his duties to his son, the old elephant returned alone to the forest.

The young elephant worked faithfully and obediently, the same as his father had done. The carpenters fed him as they had fed his father, and he thrived.

At the end of each work day, the elephant bathed in the river before returning to the forest. The carpenters’ children enjoyed pulling him by the trunk and

playing all sorts of games with him both in the water and on the riverbank.

Of course, noble creatures, be they elephants, horses, or men, never urinate or defecate in water. This elephant, being noble and pure white, was always careful never to do anything of the kind while he was in the river. He always waited until he came out.

One day, when it rained very heavily, flood waters caught a half-dry cake of the white elephant's dung and carried it down river. This piece of dung floated to Bārāṇasī where it lodged in a bush, right at the spot where the king's elephant keepers brought the king's five hundred elephants to bathe. When these beasts caught the scent of the dung of the noble young elephant, they refused to enter the water. Instead, they extended their tails, fanned their ears, and ran from the river.

When the keepers explained what had happened to the elephant trainers, the trainers realized that there was something in the water. Orders were given to search the river, and the lump of dung was found in the bush. The trainers powdered the dung and mixed it with a little water. Then they sprinkled it over the backs of the other elephants. This caused the animals to smell very sweet, and they immediately went into the water to bathe. The trainers were sure the dung had come from a very noble elephant. They reported all this to the king and advised him to capture the elephant for himself.

The king ordered a raft prepared and set off upstream. When he reached the place where the carpenters had settled, he found the young elephant playing in the water. As soon as the elephant heard the sound of the king's drums, he came out of the water and drew near to the carpenters. They all went together to pay their respects to the king.

"Sire," the carpenters said, "if you wish us to do any work for you, you didn't need to come yourself. You could have sent for it, and we would have brought it to you."

"No, my friends," the king answered. "I've come not for wood, but for this elephant."

"He is yours, Sire!" they replied immediately, but the elephant refused to budge.

Addressing the elephant directly, the king asked, "What do you want me to do?"

"Order the carpenters paid for what they have spent on me, Sire," the elephant answered.

"Willingly, friend." The king ordered a hundred thousand coins to be piled by the elephant's trunk, by his tail, and beside each foot, but this was not enough for the elephant; he still refused to go. Each of the carpenters was given clothes for himself and his wife. Then the king provided money for all the children.

Satisfied that his friends would be able to manage without his help, the elephant bade farewell to the carpenters, their wives, and the children, and departed with the king.

The king took the elephant to his capital, which was beautifully decorated to mark the occasion. He led the elephant around the city in a solemn procession and gave him a beautifully furnished stable.

The elephant served as the king's comrade, and no one else was ever permitted to ride him. With the help of this elephant, the king won supremacy over all India.

After some time, the Queen Consort became pregnant. When it was almost time for her to give birth, the king died.

Everyone realized that if the elephant were to learn of the death of the king, his heart would break, so he was cared for as usual, but not a word was said.

As soon the king of Kosala heard rumors of the king's death, however, he thought, "Surely Bārāṇasī is at my mercy!" and he decided to attack the kingdom.

Marching at the head of a great army, he laid siege to the capital. The people of Bārāṇasī closed the city gates and sent a message to the king of Kosala: "The Queen of Bārāṇasī is near the time of her delivery, and the astrologers have predicted that she will bear a son in seven days. If, indeed, she bears a son, we will fight to protect the kingdom. Please grant us seven days." The king of Kosala agreed to their terms.

Just as predicted, on the seventh day, the baby boy was born. Since he was born to win the hearts of his people, the Queen named him Alīnacitta, which means "Inspirer."

On that day, the army emerged to begin fighting the king of Kosala. Without a leader, however, the soldiers were driven back and began to waver.

Shortly after the battle began, messengers went to see the queen. "Our army is losing ground," they reported, "and we are afraid of defeat. The state elephant, our late king's loyal friend, has not been told that the king is dead, that a prince has just been born, and that we are besieged by the king of Kosala. Shall we tell him?"

"Yes, the time has come," answered the Queen. She quickly dressed her baby boy and wrapped him in a fine cloth. Then she went with all the court to the elephant's stable. There she laid the infant at the elephant's feet, saying, "Master, your comrade, the king, is dead, but we were afraid to tell it to you for fear your heart would break. This is your king's son. Now the king of Kosala is besieging our city, and is making war upon us. Our army is losing ground. Either kill your son yourself or win back his kingdom for him!"

The elephant stroked the child with his trunk and gently lifted him up to his own head. Then with lamentation for his dead master, he took the baby and laid him in his mother's arms.

The elephant told the officers to dress him in his armor and to prepare for battle. They unlocked the city gate, and escorted him out. The great beast emerged trumpeting. His awe-inspiring demeanor so surprised and frightened the invaders that they panicked and fled in retreat.

During the rout, the elephant managed to seize the king of Kosala by his topknot. He carried his prisoner to the young prince and dropped him at the baby's feet. Soldiers sprang to kill the invader, but the elephant stopped them. "Be careful in the future," the noble elephant advised the captive king. "Never presume to take advantage of us because our Prince is young." Then he allowed the king to go.

Alīnacitta was consecrated King at the age of seven. Like his father, he ruled

all of India, and no foe dared rise up against him again. His reign was just, and, when he came to the end of his life, he went to swell the hosts of heaven.

To conclude his discourse, Buddha observed that any monk, strong in will and seeking a refuge in the Triple Gem, would prevail as did the determined elephant of yore. After Buddha had declared the Truths, the weak-hearted monk was established in Arahatsip.

Identifying the birth, Buddha said, “Queen Mahāmāyā was then the mother; this monk was the elephant who won the kingdom and handed it over to the child; Sāriputta was the father elephant; and I myself was the young prince.”

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