

# THE JĀTAKAS

## Birth Stories of the Bodhisatta

*Translated from the Pāli by*  
SARAH SHAW



PENGUIN BOOKS

2006

## The story of the hare Sasa Jātaka (316)

Vol. III, 51

In the introduction to the Jātakas the Bodhisatta-to-be is told by the last Buddha to be unstinting in his generosity. 'Just as a jar filled to the brim, toppled by someone, pours forth water and does not guard anything that remains there, so you, when you see supplicants, low, middling or high, practise generosity like the toppled jar with nothing remaining.'<sup>1</sup> Generosity, as the first perfection, is the basis for all the others. Throughout Jātakas the first injunction when any discourse is delivered is to give donations to the poor, food to guests and, most auspiciously of all, food, support and honour to holy men. Stories of the boundless generosity of the Bodhisatta, to the extent that he offers his own body or even parts of it, are frequent in the Jātakas. Among the most famous of these is the Sivi Jātaka (499), where the Bodhisatta offers his own eyes but has his vision restored by Sakka. In the Vessantara Jātaka (547), in which the Bodhisatta gives away his wife and children, Sakka again intervenes and, masquerading as a brahmin, asks Vessantara for his wife, but returns her without committing any violation. The children are bought from the evil brahmin who has enslaved them, by more mundane means of gold; the brahmin then dies from overeating.<sup>2</sup> There is clearly a symbolic element in these stories, borne out by the usual outcome of the acts of giving: the fairy-tale understanding that what is given freely will be found again underlies Jātakas where the Bodhisatta

offers himself. Usually he is saved from his own wish to give by Sakka, the lord of the heaven where beings are reborn for practising generosity and virtue: Sakka seems to personify a kind of protective common sense in the world. Sometimes what has been lost is soon restored, as in the Sivi Jātaka. If the Bodhisatta does die through his actions he immediately experiences a heavenly rebirth: generosity is simply felt in Buddhist countries to bring good luck. 'The story of the hare' is cited almost universally as fulfilling the first perfection: the fact that it is generosity offered to a holy man, on an *uposatha* day, renders it particularly auspicious. The comedy of the self-righteousness of the otter and the jackal, who steal so they can offer alms, gives a nice counterpoint to the action.

It is the Bodhisatta's only rebirth as a hare. For this story to be completely effective, one needs to be in the southern hemisphere, where the hare appears clearly upright on the face of the moon on the night of the full moon, the long ears loosely following the line of the upper rim. The generous hare may be seen depicted throughout temples in Sri Lanka: in the Asigiriya temple in Kandy, for instance, he is shown painted in the moon on one side of a standing Buddha figure, with the sun on the other. He is one of the earliest Jātaka figures in Sri Lanka, shown in the vestibule of the Sivakāya shrine.<sup>3</sup> In India he is depicted at Nāgārjunakoṇḍa among third-century CE sculptures, found on the north wing of the main gallery of the island museum. The tale has counterparts in Indian and Chinese folklore and features in the *Jātakamālā* collection.<sup>4</sup> It has always been popular throughout South-East Asia.

### *Story from the present*

*'I've got seven red fish'*

While living in the Jetavana Grove the Teacher told this story about a gift of all the requisites. It is said that in Sāvātthi a certain

man of property made a gift of all the requisites to the order of monks, with the Buddha at its head. He had a pavilion put up at the door of his house and invited the order of monks, with the Buddha at its head, asked them to take the very comfortable seat that he had had prepared in the pavilion and gave a meal to them of various kinds of the most delicious tasting and abundant food. 'Come again tomorrow, and the next day,' he urged. He invited them every day for seven days and on the seventh day he gave all the requisites to five hundred monks in front of the Buddha. The Teacher voiced his appreciation for the food, the services given and the shelter. 'Lay disciple: you are right to give this joy and happiness. For this is the kind of generosity that was the tradition for wise men of old. They even offered up their lives for any beggars they encountered, and gave their own flesh.' And, invited by his host, he narrated this tale of long ago.

### *Story from the past*

Once upon a time, during the reign of Brahmādatta in Vārāṇasī, the Bodhisatta took rebirth as a hare and lived in the forest. Now on one side of this forest there was the foot of a mountain, on another a river and on the third an outlying village. He had three friends: a monkey, a jackal and an otter. These four wise animals lived on one side, [52] each on their own patch, each taking their own feeding ground and then meeting together every evening. The wise hare gave a *dharmma* talk to encourage the other three and said: 'Practise generosity, guard your virtue and keep the *uposatha* day.' They took heed of his advice and each entered their own lair dwelling and lived there.

When some time had passed the Bodhisatta looked at the sky and saw the moon. He noticed that the next day would be the *uposatha* day, and said to the three others, 'Tomorrow is the *uposatha* day. You three had better take up the precepts and be

keepers of the *uposatha* day, for the one who stands firm in virtue and alms-giving has great reward. Therefore you should feed those that you encounter seeking alms from the food that you have obtained.' They said 'very well', took his advice, and each went back to their own abode and remained there. On the next day the otter went out and, deciding to investigate a feeding ground, left and went out to the banks of the Ganga. Then a lone fisherman raised seven red fish, threaded them upon a creeper and took them and buried them in the sand beside the Ganga and went downstream. The otter scented the odour of the fish, dug up the sand, saw the fish and took them out. 'Who is the owner of these?' he asked. When he had shouted three times, and had not seen an owner, he took the creeper between his teeth and left it aside for himself in his thicket dwelling. Saying to himself, 'I will eat this at the meal time,' he lay down and reflected on how virtuous he was! The jackal also left in search of a feeding ground and saw at the hut of a single field watchman two pieces of meat on a spit, a lizard and a pot of milk curds. 'Who is the owner of these?' he asked. When he had shouted out three times and not spotted an owner he strung on his neck a rope that he had found for the pot of curds, and biting into the pieces of flesh and the lizard took them in his teeth back to his own thicket and laid them aside, thinking 'I'll eat these when it is meal time.' He then lay down and [53] reflected on how virtuous he was. The monkey entered a forest grove and fetched a bunch of mangoes and put them aside in the thicket where he lived. 'I'll eat these when it is time' he said. He then lay down and reflected on how virtuous he was.

The Bodhisatta, however, set out at the right time for a meal intending to eat jungle grass. As he rested in the thicket where he lived he thought, 'Near me mendicants come by: I cannot give them grasses. I have no sesame oil or rice grain and if any mendicant comes up to me I will give him the flesh of my own

body.' By the power of his virtue the golden throne of Sakka gave the appearance of heat.<sup>5</sup> He considered this and saw the reason for it and decided. 'I will test the hare king.' He went first to the dwelling place of the otter and stood in the disguise of a brahmin. 'Brahmin, why are you standing there?' asked the otter. 'Wise one, if, while keeping the *uposatha*, I should receive any food, I could perform my recluse's duties.' The other replied, 'Very well, I shall show you some food'. Talking with the priest the otter recited this verse:

1. 'I've got seven red fish, which I pulled out from the water on the dry ground  
This, Brahmin, is mine; and when you have eaten this, stay in the forest.'

The priest said, 'Leave it be; it is rather early. I will find it out later.' Then he went up to the jackal. The jackal said, 'Why are you standing there?' When he had spoken he gave just the same reply. The jackal said, 'You are very welcome! I'll give you some food.' In discussion with the priest, the jackal spoke a second verse:

2. [54] 'I have done wrong: I took the field watchman's food for the night:  
the piece of flesh, the two lizards and one pot of curds.  
This, Brahmin, is mine: and when you have eaten this, stay in the forest.'

The brahmin said, 'It is rather early now, I'll come and search it out later.'

Then he went up to the monkey, who asked, 'Why are you standing there?' When he had spoken he gave just the same reply. The monkey said, 'You are very welcome; I'll give some food to you.' In discussion with the priest, the monkey recited a third verse:

1. 'Ripe mango, refreshing water and cool shade are a delight for the mind:

This, Brahmin, is mine; and when you have eaten this, stay in the forest.'

The brahmin said, 'It's too early now, I'll search it out later.' He then went up to the wise hare. When asked why he was standing there he gave the same reply. At what he heard from the brahmin the Bodhisatta was delighted. 'It is so good that you have come to me to find food. Today I will give a gift that has never been given before. But you, a virtuous man, will not cause my harm. Go sir: collect some wood, kindle the embers, and then let me know. [55] I am going to give up myself and jump within the hot embers; you can eat the flesh from my body when it is cooked, and you can perform your recluse's duties!' Then, in his discussion with the priest, the hare uttered a fourth verse:

1. 'The hare has no sesame, nor kidney beans nor rice.  
When you have eaten me, cooked in this fire, stay in the forest!'

Sakka heard what he had to say and by his own power created a heap of cinders and informed the Bodhisatta. The Bodhisatta rose from his jungle grass bed and went there and said: 'May no living beings that live in my coat die because of me.' He then shook his body three times and, giving his entire body into the mouth of generosity, he hopped up just like a royal goose into a pile of lotuses and with a delighted mind leapt on the heap of embers. But the fire could not scorch even the tips of the hairs of the Bodhisatta's body, as if he had entered into the birthplace of the snow.<sup>6</sup> Then he called to Sakka and said: 'Brahmin, the fire you made is too cool and cannot make heat even to the tips of my hair: why is this?' 'Wise one, I am not a brahmin. I am Sakka, and have come in order to test you.' 'Sakka, however long you stay there, you would not see in me any reluctance to be eaten,

even if all the people in the world were to test me in generosity. The Bodhisatta roared the roar of a lion. So then Sakka said, 'Wise hare, may your virtue be known for the entire aeon.' So pressing a mountain, he took the essence of mountain and painted the shape of a hare on the moon. Then he summoned the Bodhisatta and, in the forest grove just by the forest thicket, he caused him to lie down by some tender jungle grasses and went to his own heavenly realm. [56] The four wise creatures lived in harmony and with courteous minds, fulfilling virtue and keeping the *uposatha* day, until they went in accordance with their deeds.

The Teacher introduced this account to reveal the noble truth and explained the connection with the birth: at this explanation of the truth the householder, who was generous with everything to do with the requisites, obtained the fruits of stream-entry. 'At that time Ānanda was the otter, Moggallāna the jackal, Sāriputta the monkey and I was the hare.'

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> *The Story of Gotama Buddha*, p. 25 (J I 20).

<sup>2</sup> Cone and Gombrich, *Perfect Generosity*, pp. 75ff., section 568ff.

<sup>3</sup> H.C.P. Bell, *Archaeological Survey of Ceylon*, Annual Report, 1909.

<sup>4</sup> Oddly enough, Thompson's *Motif Index* makes no mention of this story, which seems to travel with Buddhism. For comment, see Winternitz, *History of Indian Literature*, II, p. 145, n.3. See also L. Alsdorf, *Śāśa-Jātaka und Śāśa-Avadāna*, *wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Sud-und Ostasiens*, Wien, 1961; Francis and Thomas, *Jātaka Tales*, p. 229; and, for extensive overview on literature on the subject, L. Grey, *A Concordance of Buddhist Birth Stories*, Oxford: PTS, 2000, pp. 365–70 (dittography in this section). For *Jātakamālā* story, see Khorroche, *Once the Buddha was a Monkey*, pp. 37–45 (story 2).

<sup>5</sup> Sakka is king of the gods of the heaven of the Thirty-Three Gods, where one can be reborn through acts of generosity, faith or by keeping the precepts. In the Jātakas an undertaking or an act of great virtue—

such as the gift of King Vessantara of his wife and children—causes Sakka's seat to become hot, and King Sakka goes to protect the one who has enacted great virtue from any disastrous result of such a courageous volition.

<sup>6</sup> *Himagabbham*: the clouds, as in the story from the present in Jātaka 1.