

## RŪPYĀVATĪ GIVES AWAY HER BREASTS

*There are stories of the Buddha's past lives as an animal (a rabbit, a deer, a fish), and stories of the Buddha's past lives as a male human (as an ascetic, a merchant, a prince, or a king). But stories of the past lives of the Buddha in which the bodhisattva is a woman are exceedingly rare. This is one of them. Like the story of King Candraprabha in the previous chapter, in which the king gives away his head, this is also a story of generosity. And like that story, this is a story of the gift of the body. Here, however, the bodhisattva's gift does not result in her death. Instead, she lives, and undergoes two remarkable transformations.*

*The story appears in a fifth-century Sanskrit collection of jātakas or stories of the Buddha's former lives, by one Hari-bhaṭṭa, entitled the Jātakamālā (Garland of Birth Stories). It lacks the framing narratives at the beginning and the end, in which the Buddha recalls a story from the past at the outset and then provides the present identity of the cast of characters at the conclusion. But the text states at the end that this is a story of how the Buddha (referred to as Bhagavan or 'Lord') gave away his flesh.*

*Here the bodhisattva is a beautiful young woman named Rūpyāvatī, who lives in a land struck by famine. She encounters a destitute woman who is so hungry that she is about to devour her newborn son. Rūpyāvatī pleads with her not to do so. When the woman refuses, Rūpyāvatī is at a loss for a moment: if she leaves to get food, the woman will kill the child before she can return, if she takes the child away from the woman, the woman will die of starvation. There is no way for her to save them both.*

Reflecting in a Buddhist way on the impermanence of the human body – that it has no ‘essence’ – she determines to extract some use from it. In an act of high symbolic meaning, she takes a knife and cuts off her own breasts and gives them to the woman, providing her with food that she might feed her child. Her horrific wounds are not fatal, and she returns home, where she instructs her husband to provide a supply of food to the woman. Her husband then performs an ‘act of truth’ (see also Chapter 27), a kind of oath, whose power is derived from the truth of the statement. As a result of her husband’s act, Rūpyāvatī’s breasts are restored. (The restoration of a body part that has been given away is a common element of stories of the gift of the body.)

Śakra (also known as Indra), the king of the gods, then appears on the scene, in disguise. Knowing that the cause for rebirth as the king of the gods is an act of extraordinary generosity, he is concerned to determine whether Rūpyāvatī’s motivation in cutting off her breasts was to displace him from his heavenly throne. He is relieved to learn that her goal is only to achieve buddhahood for the sake of others. And to prove her aspiration, she herself performs an act of truth, asking that she become a male. She is transformed on the spot, with the (second) loss of her breasts, one of the signs of her womanhood, vividly described in verse. Shortly thereafter, the king of the city passes away without an heir, and the young Rūpyāvata (the masculine form of Rūpyāvatī) is made king. He rules beneficently until his death aged sixty, preaching to his people the virtues of generosity.

The story of Rūpyāvatī, told here in a mixture of poetry and prose, raises a host of questions concerning Buddhist attitudes to the body and to gender.

Even as a woman,  
The bodhisattva cut the flesh from her own body  
And gave it away.  
How much more did he do so as a man,  
For a man is superior in goodness and strength  
And better at achieving the welfare of others.

According to tradition, there was once a capital city called Utpalāvatī – bounded by manifold verdant gardens, its streets and markets full of merchants displaying their wares, adorning the country of Gāndhāra like an ornament worn by the earth. This is the city that is now called Puṣkalāvatī.

And there, the bodhisattva was a woman named Rūpyāvatī – beautiful, bright and charming, with all the advantages of early youth, like a goddess dwelling in her own house.

Her peaceful nature,  
Her eagerness to help others,  
And her sharp intellect  
Were a source of great wonder to people.  
She seemed the very incarnation of compassion.

Now, at that time, due to its diminishing roots of merit, the country was experiencing a great and terrible famine. The burning heat of the sun failed to melt the Himalayan snow sufficiently, and because of this the rain dried up. Without any rain, the fields withered away, as the farmers looked on dejectedly. Seeing their storerooms and treasuries become empty, the people became depressed, and their desire for guests went unfulfilled. Thin herds of cows – their ranks thinned by death – wandered around, followed by emaciated cowherds. The country was full of starving people desperate for food, like a meeting-hall for wicked men.

The heavy breasts of the young women,  
Which normally resembled shiny water-pots  
With tiny, lovely nipples,  
Now gave up their firmness,  
Due to a lack of food.

Most of the women had become extremely thin  
And lost their clear complexions.  
Their eyes were hollow  
And their jewellery neglected.

Their faces, which had formerly put to shame the  
 night-destroying moon,  
 Were now covered with rough, dry hair.  
 They no longer arched their brows playfully,  
 Nor did they break into smiles.

A housewife smeared the inside of her house with mud,  
 Gave stale food to her child  
 And saw her husband stricken with hunger.  
 But she herself no longer even cared.

A cow came to the housewife's house,  
 Acting as though she had been banished from the forest, for her  
 calf had died.  
 The folds at her throat trembled with pitiful cries,  
 And her eyes overflowed with tears.

When cows have no grass to eat,  
 They gradually become weak,  
 And their gait becomes sluggish.  
 Their udders become lax,  
 And their milk disappears.

Confused and weakened a cowherd  
 Grabbed on to the tail of a withered and emaciated cow,  
 Her bones and joints clearly visible.  
 He bit into her hindquarters and somehow threw her down.

With their food and drink all gone and their herds of cows  
 dead,  
 With their pale bodies dressed in old, ragged clothes,  
 The people who had gone to live in that country  
 Were [now] unable to escape from their home.

Now Rūpyāvatī, at one time, saw a female servant at some  
 place. Because of the difficulty of having just given birth, her  
 body burned with the scorching hot fire of hunger. Her cheeks,  
 eyes, belly and other bodily cavities were sunken and depressed,

and her ribs were clearly visible. Her body was dressed in  
 filthy and decrepit clothing. Because she valued only the love of  
 herself and had lost any feeling for her offspring, she was about  
 to devour her very own child.

Seeing her, Rūpyāvatī said to her: 'Sister, why do you wish to  
 commit this extremely vile deed?'

The woman thought to herself: 'This woman Rūpyāvatī is  
 indeed generous and compassionate by nature. Therefore, if I  
 tell her what I intend to do, surely she will remedy my hunger.'

Thinking this, she said: 'Yes, sister, it's true: my body is  
 afflicted by the fire of hunger, made even worse by having just  
 given birth. Therefore, I intend to devour my son.'

Look, indeed, how she shows hatred even for her own child!  
 For the self-love of beings does not see right and wrong!

Then Rūpyāvatī, her lotus-eyes cloudy with tears incited by her  
 compassion, said to the woman:

'O merciless woman!  
 Your baby's great anguish is obvious  
 From the extent of his pitiful wails  
 And his tangled, knotted hair.  
 How can you ignore your son,  
 Whose eyes are as beautiful as those of a baby deer?

'With his ringlets bouncing and shaking about,  
 And his eyelashes full of soil and dust –  
 Kind-hearted women feel love for a baby,  
 Even if he's the son of another.

'Why won't you look at the face of your child?  
 He babbles and chortles.  
 His eyes are wide open, and a ceremonial mark  
 Has already been made on his forehead.  
 The bud of his lower lip quivers with a smile.

'What woman would not wish to see her child [grow into a boy?] –  
Sitting on a toy horse and holding a whip, his black ringlets  
flying,  
Childishly pretending he's on a real horse,  
His rows of brilliant teeth, like little buds,  
Glittering with laughter.

'Even when afflicted with hunger,  
A mother crow cares for and nourishes her young,  
Who follow her around with their faces lifted up  
And their beaks wide open,  
Longing for food and uttering a thin cry.  
So how much more should a virtuous woman do so!

'When people hear that you have murdered your son out of  
rage, they could banish you from the country like a demoness!  
So please abstain from this reckless deed!

'Having eaten your son,  
Like a tigress who devours a baby deer,  
How will you eat flaming iron balls [in hell],  
O wicked woman?'

She replied: 'What can I do, sister? For I cannot bear this fire of  
hunger that afflicts my entire body!'

Then Rūpyāvatī thought thus: 'If I take this child and go, then  
surely this woman will die. But if I go to get some food to  
appease her hunger, then she'll kill the child [while I am gone].

'Stupidly doing something that is useless and inopportune  
Only causes a person exhaustion.  
Why carry a parasol  
Once the sun's bright light has set?

'But this here is an opportunity. I will satisfy this woman by  
means of my own flesh!

'I must extract the essence  
From this crumbling, essenceless body,  
As if I were plucking a piece of fruit  
From a tree hanging on to a river bank,  
Its roots flying to and fro  
And being lashed by the current.'

Then the woman again spoke: 'Sister, please go! I cannot get  
this child ready [to eat] in front of you!'

Then Rūpyāvatī said to her: 'Wait a moment. First, bring  
me a knife, if you have one here.' And the woman brought  
Rūpyāvatī a knife.

Then Rūpyāvatī cut off her breasts with the sharp knife,  
Like two golden water-pots gushing with blood.  
She gave them to the starving young woman,  
Unconcerned with the suffering of her own body.

Those who are indifferent to their own suffering  
Remove the suffering of living beings.  
For they are troubled by the suffering of others,  
But not by the suffering of themselves.

Then, having given both breasts to the woman, Rūpyāvatī went  
back into her own house.

The charming belt and garment on her beautiful body  
Were stained with blood that had gushed forth from her  
severed breasts.  
She looked like a golden image  
That has been worshipped with saffron powder.

Then Rūpyāvatī's husband jumped out of his chair and asked  
her in confusion:

'O beautiful wife,  
What horrible person  
Has cut the breasts from your beautiful body, like a demon?'

She told her husband what had happened and then said:  
 'Quickly, husband, we must give food and drink to this woman,  
 whose fire of hunger has been aggravated by giving birth.' And  
 Rūpyāvatī's husband, with a startled mind, agreed.

Obeying the command of that vessel of compassion,  
 He sent to the unfortunate woman  
 An overflowing vessel of delectable food.

And when the people saw  
 The miraculous deed Rūpyāvatī had done,  
 They were so amazed,  
 They suddenly shook their hands [in the air]  
 Like twigs [shaking on a tree].

And people said to her:

'By means of this deed you have done,  
 Even the hearts of the wicked  
 Are now incited towards generosity!

'Surely, you, as a favour to the world,  
 Stand firm as the very embodiment  
 Of that which is known as "the perfection of generosity"  
 Among those who strive for enlightenment.

'How your sharp intellect  
 Contrasts with your female sex!  
 How this gift [of yours]  
 Stands in contrast with your delicate form!  
 By this virtuous woman's gift,  
 Which surpasses all gifts,  
 Other givers have been put to shame!'

Then Rūpyāvatī's husband performed an act of truth:

'As no one else – not even a man –  
 Has given such a gift before,

By means of this truth,  
 Let my wife's breasts immediately be restored!

As soon as the householder had performed his act of truth,  
 Her chest was restored, heavy with the weight of her bosoms.

And then Rūpyāvatī once again adorned the city,  
 Like a lotus pond that relieves the thirst of the world  
 Through the water of generosity.  
 Her heavy breasts were like two Cakravākā birds,  
 Her beautiful face was like a lotus,  
 And her teeth were like lotus filaments.

Then Śakra, king of the gods, began to wonder: 'By means of this  
 gift, which surpasses all gifts in the world, does Rūpyāvatī wish  
 to expel me from the City of the Immortals and herself assume  
 sovereignty over the gods?' With an apprehensive mind, and eager  
 to know how she felt, he plunged through the sky, dark with masses  
 of diffuse rain clouds, and descended into the capital city of Utpa-  
 lāvatī. He magically turned himself into a very beautiful brahmin.  
 His chest was adorned with a white sacred thread woven from  
 lotus-fibres; his neck was beautified by a string of beads; one  
 shoulder was hidden from the eyes of women by a spotted black  
 antelope skin; and he carried a bag made out of leaves in his right  
 hand. Pretending to beg for food, he came to Rūpyāvatī's house.

Then Rūpyāvatī brought hard and soft foods of various types  
 and offered them to Śakra, disguised in the excellent form of a  
 brahmin. The lord of gods greeted her and said:

'The whole world is adorned by the fame  
 Resulting from the sacrifice of your breasts.  
 It spreads [in all directions]  
 And is as dazzlingly bright as a piece of conch shell.

'By means of this austerity,  
 Do you desire to conquer the station belonging to Indra?  
 Good woman,  
 I ask you this only out of curiosity.'

Then she declared to the lord of gods:  
 'As I wish only for the state of a victor [a buddha]  
 In order to bring peace to the three worlds,  
 O brahmin, by means of this truth of mine,  
 Let my sex become male immediately,  
 For manhood is an abode of virtue in this world.'

As soon as she had spoken these words,  
 She attained the state of a man,  
 And Śakra went back to his own city  
 With a satisfied mind.  
 And when they heard that this miraculous deed  
 Had been accomplished in the world,  
 The people's resolve became even stronger.

And when her two breasts –  
 Swollen like the frontal lobes of an elephant in rut –  
 Saw just a few beard hairs as dark as collyrium powder  
 Appearing on that moon-like face,  
 They immediately disappeared into a broad chest,  
 As if out of shame.

And the *bodhisattva* came to be known in the world by the name of Rūpyāvata.

Then, some time later, in the capital city of Utpalāvati, the king died without an heir. And after the king died, the city was no longer resplendent, like a night when the moon is in eclipse.

Then, when several days had passed, and the ministers had comforted the women of the palace (though their own grief was great over the loss of the king), they spoke as follows to the assembled citizens.

'Because we have no leader, our country could, at some point, be taken over by our enemies and deprived of its own leadership. And then all our effort would be too late and nothing but a cause for our weariness, like the digging of a well to put out the fire of a burning house. So this is our opportunity. This youth Rūpyāvata is endowed with all the marks of royalty and all

desirable virtues. Thus, it is he whom we should consecrate into sovereignty.'

So the joyful citizens performed the consecration of him  
 Whose mind was totally devoted to helping others.  
 Together with his entourage,  
 They raised [over him] a beautiful white parasol  
 With a pair of chowrie-fans.

They festooned the market places and arched doorways with  
 garlands,  
 Perfumed the streets and highways by sprinkling fragrant  
 water,  
 And filled the streets with charming dancers.  
 They made their city like the palace of Kubera.

Then the rain clouds gave them water,  
 Seasonably and to their heart's content,  
 And no natural disasters ever gave them trouble.  
 With that lord of the earth  
 Ruling the earth through good government,  
 People no longer heard even the word 'suffering'.

The rice grew abundantly without being cultivated,  
 And the trees were always laden with flowers and fruit,  
 As if kingship itself were ruling over the well-ruled earth.  
 The water-buffalo gushed forth such abundant milk,  
 They virtually milked themselves.

He had fulfilled his desire for uncurtailed giving.  
 His senses were restrained, and he possessed good fortune  
 And the three constituents of regal power – [sovereignty, good  
 counsel and energy].  
 His body was adorned with the ornaments of various good  
 qualities.  
 With that earth-protector,  
 The world was [truly] blessed with a king.

That lion among kings,  
Whose lotus-feet were worshipped by the other kings  
And whose face was like a lotus,  
Mounted a lion-throne.  
Though solitary by nature,  
He taught the *dharma* leading to the ultimate fruit  
On behalf of his people.

'Look at the magnitude of the fruit resulting from generosity!  
By means of it, I have got rid of my female state  
Right here, in this world,  
And as the fruit of a celebrated birth,  
I have produced the state of a man –  
Made delightful by its sovereignty over the world  
And its three regal constituents.

'Moreover, this is nothing more than a single flower  
Blooming on the tree of generosity –  
For another, greater fruit will be produced  
In the world to come.  
Repeatedly keeping this in mind,  
You should all deposit endless treasure-stores of gifts,  
Spotless in virtue, among the world of supplicants.

'If the soil of the field of supplicants  
Were not sprinkled with the waters of virtue,  
Where would the giver who desires the fruit of generosity  
Plant the seeds of his gifts?

'Those who exceed their fellow man  
In giving away their famous merit –  
What man, if he has any wisdom,  
Would wish to scare such people away from their supplicants,  
Contracting his brows like a snake?

'One person constantly speaks words full of praise,  
While another person speaks words that are cruel.  
One person looks [on others] respectfully,

While another, through snobbery, looks [on them] with  
disdain.

One person gives away many things,  
While another gives only one thing.  
I am a giver,  
And the girl rich in virtue whom I ask to marry  
Will conquer me  
By the former qualities.

'If all directions are to be made fragrant with flower-garlands  
of virtue,  
Or if your heart desires to experience a great fruit,  
Then flourishing trees of wealth  
With shades of great fame  
Must be planted in the ground of supplicants  
Every single day.'

Then, having lived in the world for sixty years,  
Having constantly gratified virtuous supplicants,  
Having made all directions shine as brightly as a white  
water-lily  
By means of his fame,  
That king, rich in virtue,  
Went to another rebirth.

Thus, in such a way, did the Lord give away his own flesh, even  
when he was a woman. So who, indeed, as a man, would show  
concern for material things?

This story should be told to encourage people to give.

Translated by Reiko Ohnuma from *Rūpyāvatījatakam* in the  
*Haribhaṭṭa-Jātakamālā*, in Michael Hahn, *Haribhaṭṭa and*  
*Gopadatta: Two Authors in the Succession of Āryasūra. On the*  
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