

The King's Officer Gāmani-Canda Jātaka



It was while staying at Jetavana that the Buddha told this story in praise of wisdom.

Once, in the Hall of Truth, some bhikkhus were talking about the Buddha's sharp and penetrating wisdom. When the Buddha heard what they were discussing, he said, "This is not the first time, bhikkhus, that the Tathāgata has been wise." Then he told this story of the past.

Long, long ago, when Janasandha was reigning in Bārānasi, the Bodhisatta was born to his chief queen. The infant had a golden complexion, and his face shone like a well-polished mirror, so he was named Ādāsamukha.

The king died when Prince Ādāsamukha was only seven years old, but, by then, he had already completed his education. On the seventh day after the king's death, the ministers gathered to discuss the succession. Some felt that the prince was too young to become king, but others pointed out that he was an unusually mature child. It was agreed that, before they could decide, they had to test the prince.

The next day, they sat the prince down in the court and brought in a trained monkey, cleverly disguised as a courtier. As he'd been trained to do, the monkey walked in on two feet, and sat properly on a couch.

"My lord," the ministers said, "in your father's time, we depended on this man to design the most important buildings in the kingdom. He personally designed this palace for your father. Please give him a post in your court."

"This is not a man," the prince replied. "It's no more than a monkey with a wrinkled face. I doubt that he could build anything, for monkeys only destroy what others make."

"It must be as you have said, my lord!" said the ministers, and they led the monkey out. In this way, they tested him three times, but, each time, he saw through their ruse. At last, they concluded, "This is a wise prince; he will be able to rule!" In a grand ceremony, Prince Ādāsamukha was proclaimed king.

One of the former king's servants, an old man named Gāmani-Canda, thought, "The new king is young. His advisors and servants should be those closer to his own age. It is time for me to retire." He left Bārānasi, moved to the countryside, and took up farming.

Gāmani-Canda had no oxen of his own, so, as soon as the rains began and the ground was ready to be worked, he borrowed two strong oxen from a neighbor. After working all day long, he fed the oxen ample grass and took them back to the neighbor's house. When he arrived there, he saw that the man and his wife were eating supper. Since they did not invite him to share their meal, he led the oxen to their stalls and returned home, without bothering the couple and without formally returning the oxen.

When the owner went to the shed early the next morning, the oxen were not there. He could see the tell-tale marks, and he was sure that the oxen had been stolen by a gang of thieves, but he decided to accuse his neighbor. "I'll make Gāmani pay me for my oxen!" he muttered as he

went to find his hapless neighbor.

“Where are my oxen?” he shouted as soon as he saw Gāmani-Canda.

“Aren’t they in their stalls? I put them there last night.”

“No, they are not in their stalls. Did you formally return them to me?”

“No, I didn’t. You were eating, so I didn’t want to bother you.”

“I don’t believe you!” retorted the neighbor. “Here’s the king’s officer! Come along!” he shouted. It was the custom at that time for a person to make a citizen’s arrest by holding a small stone or a shard of pottery and announcing, “Here’s the king’s officer!” A person who refused such an arrest would be punished, whether he were innocent or guilty of any other crime. Intimidated by those words, Gāmani-Canda meekly submitted.

On their way to Bārānasi, the pair passed through a village where a friend of Gāmani-Canda lived. “I’m very hungry,” Gāmani-Canda said to his captor. “Please wait while I get something to eat!” and he went into his friend’s house.

His friend was not at home, but the wife greeted him and said, “There is nothing left from breakfast, but, if you can wait a moment, I will fix you something.” She climbed to the top of the granary to fetch some rice, but her foot slipped, and she fell off the ladder. Servants immediately carried her to her bed, but she was seven months pregnant, and the fall caused her to have a miscarriage.

The husband returned a few minutes later and, seeing her condition, shouted, “Gāmani, you hit my wife and caused her to lose her baby! Here’s the king’s officer!” This man dragged poor Gāmani-Canda out and found the neighbor waiting for him. Now two captors held poor Gāmani-Canda between them as they headed toward Baranasi.

As they approached the village gate, a horse came galloping toward them. “Uncle Gāmani!” a man shouted. “That’s my horse! Throw something at him. Send him back this way!” Gāmani quickly picked up a stone and threw it at the horse. The stone struck the horse’s hoof, causing the beast to fall and to break its leg.

“Gāmani!” the man cried. “Why did you do that? You broke my horse’s leg! Here’s the king’s officer!”

Poor Gāmani-Canda was now the prisoner of three men! “These three will denounce me to the king,” he moaned to himself as they continued toward Baranasi. “I can’t pay for the oxen. I can’t pay the fine for causing the miscarriage. I have no money for a horse. I’d be better off dead!”

Near the road, he spied a clump of trees on a slope. The other side of the hill fell away in a steep precipice. “Excuse me,” Gāmani-Canda said to his captors, “but I need to answer the call of nature. Please wait here a moment while I go into the woods.” He quickly ran to the top of the hill and threw himself over the precipice, intending to end it all. He hadn’t noticed that, at the foot of the precipice, in the shade of the hill, two basket makers sat on the ground, weaving a mat. Gāmani-Canda fell directly on top of one of the basket makers and killed him on the spot. Speechless from the shock, Gāmani-Canda picked himself up and stood there.

“You v-v-villain!” stuttered the other basket maker. “You have m-m-murdered my father! Here’s the k-k-king’s officer!” he cried, seizing Gāmani-Canda’s hand and dragging him toward the road.

“What’s this?” asked the other three.

“This fellow has murdered my father!”

“Let’s go!” the others shouted, and the four of them dragged poor Gāmani-Canda toward

Bārānasi.

As they passed through another village, the headman greeted the old man, “Uncle, where are you off to?”

“To see the king,” replied Gāmani-Canda.

“Indeed!” cried the headman. “I’ve been meaning to send him a message. You see, I have always been handsome, rich, and healthy. Recently, however, I have been miserable and suffering from jaundice. Please ask the king why this is. I’ve heard that he is a wise man, so I’m sure he’ll know. You can give me his answer when you return.”

Gāmani-Canda cheerfully agreed to ask the king.

In the next village, the local prostitute called out, “Where are you going, Uncle?”

“To see the king,” he answered.

“They say the king is a wise man. Take him a message for me. I used to make plenty of money, but, these days, I’m not getting even the price of a betel-nut. Nobody hires me. Ask the king why this is, and tell me what he says when you come back.”

At a third village, a young woman shouted to Gāmani-Canda, “Uncle! Recently, I haven’t been able to stay comfortably either with my husband or in my parents’ house. Ask the king why this is, and tell me what he says.”

A little further on, there was a snake living in an anthill near the road. When he learned that Gāmani-Canda was going to see the king, he said, “When I go out to get my food, I’m famished, but my body fills the hole, and I can barely get out of this anthill. When I return after eating, I feel fat, but I can slide easily through the hole, without even touching the sides. Why is this? Please ask the king, and bring me his answer.”

Further on, a deer called out, “Uncle, I can’t eat grass anywhere but under this tree. Ask the king, and tell me why this should be.”

Next, a partridge said, “When I sit at the foot of this ant hill and sing, my voice is beautiful, but, anywhere else, it sounds terrible. Ask the king why, and let me know.”

As they passed through a forest, a tree deva said, “I used to be highly honored, but now I don’t receive any respect, and no one makes offerings to me. Ask the king what has happened.”

From a pool of water beside the road, a naga rose up and said, “The water in this pool was once as clear as crystal. Now it’s murky and covered with scum. Ask the king why this has happened.”

Not far from the capital, some ascetics called out, “In the past, our park had plenty of sweet fruit, but now the fruit is tasteless and dry. Ask the king why!”

Just outside the gate of Bārānasi, some brahmin students stopped Gāmani-Canda and said, “Previously, we easily understood our lessons, and our subject was perfectly clear. Now we can’t memorize anything, and our lessons are like muddy water in a leaky jar. Ask the king why!”

The four men led Gāmani-Canda into the court, and the king recognized him immediately. “This is my father’s servant, Gāmani-Canda, who used to dandle me on his knee,” the king shouted with joy. “Where are you living now, Gāmani? We haven’t seen you for a long time? What brings you here?”

“Sire,” Gāmani-Canda began, “when my lord, your father, died, I retired to the country and began to support myself by farming. This morning, this man accused me of stealing his oxen, and he has brought me here.”

“Well, Gāmani,” the king shouted with a laugh, “If he had not brought you here, you never would have come, so I am very pleased. Where is that man?”

“Here, Your Majesty.”

“You brought our friend, Gāmani?”

“Yes, Sire.”

“Why?”

“He refuses to give back my pair of oxen!”

“Is this so, Gāmani?”

“My lord,” Gāmani-Canda replied, “Please listen to my side of the story,” and he proceeded to tell the king exactly what had happened.

The king turned again to the neighbor and asked, “Did you see the oxen enter the stall?”

“No, my lord,” the man replied.

“Tell me the truth!” the king commanded.

“W-w-ell,” the man stammered, “I’m n-n-not sure.”

“Speak honestly! I am warning you,” said the king sharply. “Yes, Your Majesty, I saw them,” he admitted.

“Thank you,” said the king. “Now, Gāmani, you failed to return the oxen. Therefore, you still owe this man for them. On the other hand, this man just lied to me. Therefore, I order you to pluck out his eyes! Then you must pay him twenty-four coins for the oxen.” Courtiers stepped forward as if to seize the neighbor’s arms to hold him for punishment.

“If I lose my eyes,” he thought, as he started to sweat profusely, “what do I care for the money?” He fell at Gāmani-Canda’s feet and begged, “Good neighbor, Gāmani, please keep the twenty-four coins, and take these, as well!” He gave him all the money he had with him, jumped up, and fled as fast as he could.

The king turned to Gāmani-Canda’s friend and asked, “My good man, why have you come to see me?”

“Your Majesty,” he answered, “this man struck my wife and caused her to miscarry.”

“Is this true?” asked the king.

“No, Sire.” Gāmani-Canda replied. “I stopped at his house to ask for something to eat, and his wife was going to fix me breakfast.”

“Did you strike her and cause her to miscarry?” asked the king.

“No, Sire! She fell from the ladder.”

Turning to the accuser, the king asked, “Do you expect me to heal the miscarriage which he has caused?”

“No, Sire, that is not my request.”

“Well, what do you want as satisfaction?”

“I expected to have a son, Your Majesty, and ...”

“All right,” the king interrupted. “Gāmani, I order you to take the man’s wife to your house. When a son is born to the two of you, give the baby to this man, and send back the wife!”

This man also fell at Gāmani-Canda’s feet. “Don’t take my wife!” he cried. He, too, threw down some money and hurried off.

“Now, my good man,” the king said to the stable owner, “what brings you here?”

“This man broke my horse’s leg,” he replied.

“Is this true?” the king asked, and Gāmani-Canda explained exactly what had happened.

Turning back to the stable owner, the king asked, “Did you ask Gāmani to throw something at the horse to make him turn back?”

“No, Sire, I did not,” he replied, but on being pressed, he finally admitted that he had.

“Gāmani,” said the king, “this man just lied to me. For that, I order you to tear out his tongue. Then we will pay him one thousand coins for his horse.” The terrified stable owner quickly gave Gāmani-Canda a sack of money and fled.

“And what brings you here?” the king asked the basket maker.

“Sire, this man is a murderer. He killed my father!”

“Is this true?” the king asked Gāmani-Canda.

“No, Sire,” Gāmani-Canda replied, and he proceeded to explain exactly what had occurred.

“What do you want?” the king asked the basket maker.

“My lord, I must have my father.”

“Gāmani, this man must have a father. Obviously you cannot bring his father back from the dead, so you will have to take his mother to your house, live with her, and be a father to him.”

“Oh, Master!” the man cried. “Don’t break up my dead father’s home!” He, too, gave Gāmani-Canda a sack of money and hurried away.

Gāmani-Canda was relieved to have won all his lawsuits. Then he remembered those he had met along the way and their messages for the king. “Your Majesty,” he said, “as we were coming here this morning, many beings asked me to give you messages. May I ask you their questions?”

“Of course, Gāmani. Speak up.”

“Where shall I begin?” Gāmani-Canda wondered aloud. “Let me see. Near the city gate there were some students,” and he repeated the students’ question to the king.

“Where those students live,” the king explained, “there used to be a reliable rooster. In the past, when they heard him crow, they got up and repeated their texts until the sun came up. Because they followed this routine, they did not forget what they learned. Now they have a cock that crows erratically— sometimes in the dead of night and sometimes in broad daylight. When he crows at night, they get up, but they are too sleepy to study. When he crows during the day, it is too late for them to study. Because of this, whatever they learn, they soon forget.”

When he heard the ascetics’ question, he replied, “Formerly, those ascetics were practicing properly; they meditated regularly and performed all the duties of an ascetic. Recently, however, they have become very lax. They are not meditating diligently, and they are neglecting their duties. They give the fruit growing in the park to their attendants. Rather than all going out together, some of them stay at the hermitage, and they take turns begging for alms. Because of this sinful behavior, the trees no longer produce sweet fruit. If they resume their former practices and behave properly, the fruit will become sweet again. Tell those ascetics that there is once more a king in this land and that they should act accordingly.”

To the question from the nagas, King Ādāsamukha replied, “Those nagas have quarreled with each other, so the water has become murky. If they make peace and live with each other in harmony, the water will become clear again.”

To the question from the tree deva, he replied, “That tree deva used to protect people passing through the woods, so she received many offerings. She has stopped protecting travelers, so, of course, they do not give her anything in return. If she starts guarding them as before, she will again receive generous gifts.”

To the question from the partridge, King Ādāsamukha replied, “Under the anthill, where the partridge’s cry is so pleasant, there is buried a crock of treasure. Dig it up, and keep it for yourself.”

To the question from the deer, he replied, “In the tree under which the deer grazes is a great honeycomb. He has developed a craving for the grass on which this honey has dripped, and he

no longer cares for any other. Retrieve the honeycomb, send the best portion of it to me, and enjoy the rest yourself.”

To the question from the snake, he replied, “Under the snake’s anthill, there is a great treasure, and he lives there guarding it. When he goes out, because of his greed for this hoarded wealth, his body adheres to the hole. After he has fed, his desire to return to his treasure causes him go back in quickly and easily. Dig up the treasure, and keep it for yourself.”

To the question from the young woman, the king replied, “Between her house and her parents’ village, that young woman has a lover. Whenever she thinks of him, she cannot stay with her husband. She tells her husband that she is going to visit her parents and, on the way, stays a few days with her lover. After she has been with her parents for a few days, she begins longing again for her lover. She tells her parents that she is going to return to her husband and, on the way, stays a few more days with her lover. Gāmani, tell her that there is a king in the land and that she must stay with her husband. If she refuses, I will have her arrested!”

To the question from the prostitute, King Ādāsamukha replied, “Formerly, that prostitute didn’t offer her services to anyone until she had given the man she was with his money’s worth. By satisfying one man at a time, she made a good living. Recently, she took on a new style. Without permission from the customer she is serving, she starts taking care of someone else. Now no one wants her, and she is not making any money. If she returns to her old ways, she will once again become prosperous.”

To the question from the village headman, he replied, “That village headman used to make judgments fairly, so that men were pleased with him and gave him many presents. That is why he was handsome, rich, and honored. Now he takes bribes, and his decisions are no longer fair. People are unhappy, so he has become miserable and jaundiced. If he decides cases righteously again, he will regain all that he has lost. Tell him that there is a king in the land and that he must be fair and honest in all judgments.”

King Ādāsamukha gave Gāmani-Canda many presents, including the village where he had retired. On his return, Gāmani-Canda faithfully delivered all the answers from the king. He dug up the treasure from beneath the anthills and took it home. He got the honeycomb down from the tree and sent the best portion to the king. He stayed in the village until the end of his life and passed away to fare according to his deserts.

King Ādāsamukha continued to rule wisely, to give alms, and to live righteously. After his death, he was reborn in heaven.

Having concluded his story, the Buddha taught the Dhamma, and many attained the first path. Then the Buddha identified the birth: “At that time, Ānanda was Gāmani-Canda, and I was King Ādāsamukha.”

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