

## The Value of Friendship

### Maha-Ukkusa Jataka



*It was while staying at Jetavana that the Buddha told this story about having friends.*

*Once, a layman, the son of a genteel but impoverished family of Savatthi, sent a go-between to propose marriage to a young woman of the same class. In return, the young woman asked the go-between, “Does the young man have any reliable friends who can, on occasion, act on his behalf?”*

*“No, Madam,” the go-between answered. “I don’t believe that he has any close friends at all.”*

*“Well,” she declared, “before I can consider his offer of marriage, he must make some good friends!”*

*The young man followed her advice and introduced himself to the four city gatekeepers. After he got to know them quite well, they*

*introduced him to the town wardens. Gradually, he became friends with some of the nobles, with the king’s advisors, with the commander-in-chief, and even with the crown prince, who introduced him to the king. After some time, the king gave him a position of trust, and the young man became known as Mittagandhaka, the man with many friends. Moving in these circles, it was not long before he became acquainted with the eighty great disciples, and Venerable Ananda introduced him to the Buddha. The Buddha established his entire family in the Three Refuges.*

*The second time the young man proposed marriage, the woman unhesitatingly accepted. The king himself arranged for his wedding feast to be celebrated under royal patronage and presented the couple with a fine house. Everybody in the court also sent them gifts. Because of their regard for Mittagandhaka, all the inhabitants of Savatthi held his new wife in high regard and felt close to her.*

*On the seventh day of their wedding celebration, the new couple invited the Buddha and five hundred bhikkhus. After the meal, the Buddha gave them a blessing, and they both attained the first path.*

*Later, in the Hall of Truth, all the bhikkhus were talking about this. “Friends,” one of them said, “it is remarkable that, because Mittagandhaka followed his wife’s advice, he became a friend to everyone and received great honor from the king, and both husband and wife attained the first path.”*

*When the Buddha heard what they were discussing, he said, “Bhikkhus, this is not the first time that this man has received great benefit because of this woman. Long ago, her good advice saved their family.” Then he told this story of the past.*

Long, long ago, when Brahmadata was reigning in Baranasi, there was a large lake in the jungle. On the southern shore of the lake lived a male hawk, on the western shore lived a female hawk, on the northern shore lived a great lion, and on the eastern shore lived a huge osprey. On an island in the middle of the lake lived a turtle.

When the male hawk asked the female hawk to become his mate, she asked him directly if he had any close friends.

“No, I don’t.” he replied. “Most of the time, I just keep to myself.”

“That won’t do,” she declared. “If we are to live together, we need to have some reliable friends who can help us if trouble arises and defend us in case of danger. You must find some friends.”

“Who should I make friends with?” he asked.

“Well,” she replied, “you could get to know the osprey king, who lives on the eastern shore of the lake, and the lion king, who lives on the northern shore. You might also become friends with the turtle, who lives on the island in the middle.”

The hawk took her advice and sought out these neighbors. Soon, they were well acquainted and became good friends.

The female hawk agreed to be his mate, and they built a nest in a kadamba tree on an islet in the lake. In time, they had two babies.

One day, while the babies were still fledglings, some hunters from a nearby village were foraging through the jungle, looking for game. Late in the afternoon, they arrived empty-handed at the lake. Not wishing to return home without anything to show for their day’s labor, they tried to catch a fish or a turtle. Failing even at that, they swam to the islet and rested under the shade of the kadamba tree. Flies, gnats, and mosquitoes so tormented the men that they built a fire to drive the insects away.

As the smoke from the fire rose through the branches of the tree, the baby hawks began crying.

“Do you hear that?” shouted one of the men. “There are birds in this tree! Look! There’s the nest! Stoke the fire! Let’s roast some fowls and have our supper!”

When the mother hawk heard her babies and saw the blazing fire, she cried, “Husband! Quick! Those men want to kill our young ones! They have built a fire to roast our babies! Fly over, and tell the osprey of the danger! Ask him to save our children!”

The hawk flew swiftly to the eastern shore and gave a sharp call to announce his arrival.

“Hello,” said the osprey. “Why have you come? Is there a problem?”

“Oh, great king of the birds,” answered the hawk hurriedly. “I have come to beg your help. Some villagers have built a fire under our kadamba tree, and they plan to eat our little ones!”

“Have no fear!” said the osprey. “The wise make friends for unforeseen occasions, and the good must help each other in times of need. Of course, I will help you! Now tell me! Have the churls climbed the tree yet?”

“No, not yet. They are still piling wood on the fire,” the hawk told him.

“Good!” the osprey replied. “Then go back, and comfort your mate. Tell her I’m on my way.”

The hawk returned, and the osprey flew toward the kadamba tree to survey the scene.

As soon as the men started climbing the tree, the great bird dived into the lake, filled his mouth with water and soaked his wings. Then, as he flew over the islet, he opened his mouth and flapped his wings. The water he had brought rained down and completely quenched the fire.

Startled, the men climbed down and kindled another fire, but the osprey put it out in the same way. The men refused to give up and built a new fire every time the osprey extinguished the flames. Soon, it was quite dark, and the great bird was exhausted from hauling so much water.

“Husband,” the female hawk said to her mate, “the osprey is in distress! Go and ask the turtle to come and relieve him.”

“Friend,” the hawk said to the osprey, “thank you for your help. You have done us a great service! My wife is concerned, however, that you are wearing yourself out on our behalf. Please rest a while! You’ve done more than enough!”

“Not at all!” the osprey vehemently exclaimed. “A true friend must do all he can for his friend, even if he dies doing it!”

“We certainly appreciate that!” replied the hawk. “But please rest awhile.”

The hawk quickly flew off to visit the turtle.

“Hello,” said the turtle. “What brings you out tonight?”

“Our children are in danger!” the hawk replied. “Villagers are building fires to roast them. The noble osprey has been working for hours to put out the fires, but now he is worn out. Would you please come and help protect our nestlings?”

“One who is virtuous gives food, help, and even his life for a friend. For you, dear hawk, I will do whatever you need.”

When the turtle’s son heard what was going on, he cried, “Let me go, Father! Your friend is my friend. I’ll save those baby hawks!”

“That’s very good of you to offer,” the turtle said to his son, “but, when those villagers see me, fully grown, they might leave the hawks alone.”

The great turtle sent the hawk back and promised to be there shortly. He dived into the water, collected some mud, and swam to the islet. Crawling ashore, he threw the mud onto the fire and quenched the flames.

“What’s going on?” shouted one of the men, surprised not to see the osprey flying by. He looked down at the fire that had just been put out and cried, “Look at the size of that turtle! He’s huge!”

“There’s enough meat for all of us! Why bother with these baby hawks? Let’s roll that cursed turtle over, kill him, and enjoy turtle soup!”

The men scrambled down from the tree as fast as they could. Some began tearing strips from their clothes, and others collected creepers. They tied them to the turtle’s legs, but, struggle as they might, they could not roll him over. The mighty turtle was so strong that he kept crawling toward the water and dragged the men through the mud.

The men refused to let go until they were in such deep water that they realized they were in danger of drowning. Finally, they gave up and clambered back to shore, where they collapsed, gasping and coughing up water.

“What a mess!” one of them cried. “Half the night, a miserable osprey kept putting out our fire, and then we were almost drowned when this turtle pulled us into the lake!”

“You’re right,” said another, “but it’s too late to go home. Let’s build another fire and dry off. In the morning, we’ll catch those little hawks and have some breakfast.”

As they noisily gathered dry sticks for yet another fire, the female hawk said to her mate, “They are determined to devour our babies. Go and talk to our friend, the lion.”

The hawk flew to the northern shore of the lake and landed in front of the lion’s den. “Hello,” said the lion. “What brings you here at this time of night?”

“Great king of the beasts” the hawk began, “our little ones are in danger. Men have been trying all night to catch them. The osprey and the turtle have repeatedly put out their fires, but they have just built another one. Since you are our king, I have come to ask for your help. Would you please come and save our children?”

“For you,” the lion replied, “I am willing to perform any service at any time. As your friend, I must protect your children. Go back, and comfort your dear family. I will take care of the men. That gang of villagers must be stopped from wreaking havoc in our forest. “

The great lion leaped into the lake and churned up the water as he charged toward the islet.

The men heard the splashing and looked to see what it was. When they saw the outline of the great beast and the light of the fire reflected in his eyes, they were terrified. “A lion!” they cried. “Run for your lives!” They all jumped into the water and swam as fast as they could in the opposite direction.

When the lion got to the foot of the tree, all the men were gone. The osprey, the turtle, and the hawk emerged from the shadows and thanked him for his successful rout of the men.

In a clear voice, the lion declared, “Our friendship is of great value to us all. We must be careful never to break these ties that bind us together.”

Working together, they put out the men’s fire, and each returned to his own home.

The female hawk gazed fondly upon her young and thought, “Ah! Through friends, my little ones are safe!” Filled with happiness and contentment, she said to her mate, “What a blessing to have such good friends! It is due to the help of our friends that our children are safe and sound. Each one stayed to do his part. In our helplessness, they took pity on us, and you, our children, and I have survived this terrifying night because of them. Truly, we live and prosper because we have and are good friends!”

These animals stayed together for the rest of their lives without breaking the bond of friendship. Eventually, they all passed away to fare according to their deserts.

*Having concluded his story, the Buddha identified the birth: “At that time, the young married couple were the pair of hawks, Moggallana was the great turtle, Rahula was that turtle’s son, Sariputta was the osprey, and I was the lion.”*

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