

It's All the King's Fault Gandatindu Jataka



It was while staying at Jetavana that the Buddha told this story about the king of Kosala.

One day, when King Pasenadi was visiting Jetavana, the Buddha counseled him. "Sire," he said, "a king should rule his kingdom with righteousness. If the king is immoral, the court officials are immoral, and the people suffer. A wicked person may accept bribes, but no bribe can postpone death. No one can escape death, and, as for rebirth, one has no support other than his own virtuous actions. Even when there was no Buddha Sasana in the world, a king who followed wise advice governed righteously and was reborn in heaven." Then he told this story of the past.

Long, long ago, when Pancala was reigning in Kampilla, the entire kingdom of Uttarapancala was in a terrible condition. The king was an unjust monarch with evil habits. The king's ministers were also corrupt, and the people were unbearably oppressed by excessive taxation. Afraid that, if their property were well-kept, they would be more heavily taxed, citizens allowed their houses to fall into disrepair. In what had been prosperous

villages, only ramshackle huts remained.

At festival time each year, King Pancala made lavish offerings to the deva of a particular tinduka tree just outside the city. That deva, being well aware of the situation in the country, pitied the people and wished to help them. "This king is terrible!" he thought. "His kingdom is deteriorating rapidly, and only I can correct him. Because he honors me with generous offerings, I owe it to him to advise him well."

That night, the deva stood in the air at the head of the king's bed and emitted a beautiful aura. The king was startled by the bright light and asked who was there.

"Sire, I am the deva of the tinduka tree. I have come to give you some counsel."

"What advice do you have for me?" asked the king.

"Sire, because of your negligence, the kingdom is rapidly going to ruin. If you continue acting in the way you are now, you will soon have nothing to give your sons. If you lose your domain, you will lose your reputation, as well. The whole world will scorn you. Furthermore, not only do careless kings lose their kingdoms, but, after they die, they are reborn in hell. Diligence leads to heaven, but laziness leads to hell. If you accept the truth, you may change your fortune. You must change your ways and preserve your realm."

The deva disappeared, but the king was deeply shaken. He certainly believed what the deva had said regarding heaven and hell, but he wondered whether the situation in his kingdom was really as bad as all that. He decided to find out for himself. The next morning, he gave his ministers authority over the kingdom, and, disguised as an ordinary traveler, he left the capital with only one brahmin advisor.

Not far from the city, they came to a village where almost all the houses looked empty, with brambles piled all around them. They saw one old man carrying bundles of brambles. As soon as his wife and children were safely out of the house, he locked the door and spread the brambles in front of the house. Then the whole family hurried away to the forest. The king and his advisor sat down to see what would happen. A little later, soldiers arrived and patrolled the streets, and court officials wandered from house to house. In the evening, as soon as the soldiers and officials had left, the citizens returned from the forest. As the old man approached his door, he stepped on a sharp thorn, which punctured his foot. He sat on the doorstep, and, as he pulled out the thorn, he loudly cursed the king. "Just as I am suffering from this thorn," he cried, "let the king be struck by an arrow and cry from pain."

The brahmin walked over to where the man was sitting and said, "My good man, you are old, and your eyes are weak. What does your being injured by a thorn have to do with the king?"

The old man answered angrily, "It's because of the king that I am racked with pain. Every day, the king's tax collectors harass us. The only way we can avoid them is to hide in the forest all day. Because we are also beset by thieves, we have to protect our homes by scattering these thorns all around."

"What the old man says is true," the king said to the brahmin. "It really is my fault. I must go back and rule justly."

The deva was pleased to hear this, but he wanted the king to learn more, so he caused the brahmin to protest. "Sire," said the brahmin, "don't be hasty. Let's investigate the situation further."

The king agreed, and they went on to another village. At one house, they saw a poor old woman who was telling her two grown daughters that it was too dangerous for them to go to the forest and that she would gather firewood herself. The king watched her climb a tree to get some dead branches, but, unfortunately, she slipped and fell out of

the tree. Lying on the ground in great pain, she loudly cursed the king, “Oh, when will this king die? As long as he lives, my daughters will remain unmarried!”

The brahmin went up to her and said, “My good woman, you are being unfair! Surely, you can’t expect the king to find a husband for every single young woman in the kingdom.”

The poor woman indignantly replied, “My words are true and fair. We ordinary folk are defenseless, harassed by thieves and oppressed by tax collectors. In times like this, marriage is out of the question for poor young women. With no husbands to protect them, they’re unhappy, and we are all miserable!”

Hearing this, the king thought, “She has a very good point.”

Next, they came upon a farmer plowing his field. As he was turning around at the edge of his field, the plowshare struck his ox’s leg. As he examined the ox’s bloody leg, the farmer cried, “May the king be felled by his enemy’s spear just as my poor ox was wounded by this plowshare.”

The brahmin went up to him and said, “You have no reason to be angry with the king. You were the one plowing, so it is your fault.”

“I’m angry with the king with good cause,” replied the farmer heatedly. “We common folk are defenseless. At night, we’re attacked by thieves, and, during the day, we’re hounded by tax collectors. Today, the king’s men even confiscated my lunch packet, so my cook is preparing a second lunch for me. It’s late, and she hasn’t brought it yet. I’m so weak with hunger that I slipped, and my ox was injured.”

“He’s right!” the king said.

Early the next morning, they came to another village where they saw a farmer milking a cow. Suddenly, the vicious cow kicked the farmer, knocking him over, upsetting his stool, tipping over the pail, and spilling the milk. “May the king fall in battle!” the man swore loudly. “May he be cut down by a sword, just as I have been felled by the kick of this cursed cow!”

The brahmin went up to the farmer and said, “My good man, cows often kick while being milked. What does that have to do with the king? Why do you abuse him?”

“The king is clearly to blame,” the farmer insisted, “for defenseless folk are cruelly oppressed in his realm. Some of our dairy cows have been confiscated. Others we have had to sell to get money to pay taxes. Now, here I am trying to milk a wild cow that isn’t used to being milked! Our daily life is in disarray, and it is all the fault of the king!”

“He speaks the truth,” the king said to the brahmin, as they turned onto a path leading to the highway back to Kampilla.

On their way back to the capital, as they were passing through another small village, they heard the mournful bawl of a cow. Following the sound, they came upon the creature, lowing inconsolably. There was plenty of grass and water for her, but she wasn’t grazing. Upset by her suffering, some village boys cried, “Let the king be childless! Let him weep and moan just like this poor cow, mourning her dead calf!”

The brahmin went up to them and said, “Boys, when a beast strays from the herd and lows to express its distress, what does that have to do with the palace? Why do you curse the king?”

“The king’s sin in this case is very clear, brahmin,” the boys answered sharply. “We are always being oppressed by the king’s tax collectors who take whatever they wish with impunity. Some of the king’s men just killed this poor cow’s dappled calf and stripped off its skin to make a sword-sheath. Why should a healthy newborn calf be killed, just for a sheath for a knife?”

“We were wrong,” the king said. “You speak the truth.”

A little later, they came to a dried-up pond where crows were killing frogs with their sharp beaks and devouring them. The deva caused the king and his advisor to understand the speech of the frogs. “Let the king and his whole family be killed in a fight and eaten,” one big frog cried, “just as we poor frogs are being consumed by vicious crows!”

“Frog,” the brahmin called out, “a king cannot be expected to guard every creature in his kingdom. It’s certainly not the king’s fault that crows eat living things like you when they get the chance.”

“You are much too flattering to the king,” the frog replied. “If the ruler were righteous, his realm would be peaceful, happy, and prosperous. Crows would enjoy the offerings left at local shrines, and they would have no need to kill us poor frogs.”

The brahmin and the king shook their heads sadly and said to each other, “All creatures, down to the very frogs, curse us!”

Shaken by this revelation, the king and his adviser made their way quickly back to Kampilla. The king resolved to give up his bad habits and to rule righteously. He exhorted everyone in his court to stop their corrupt practices and to live virtuously. From then on, following the advice of the deva of the tinduka tree, the king and all the courtiers devoted themselves to generosity and other meritorious deeds.

Having concluded his story, the Buddha said once more to King Pasenadi, “Sire, a king should abandon evil and rule his kingdom with righteousness.” Then the Buddha identified the birth: “At that time, I was the deva of the tinduka tree.”