

The Case of the Gnawed Leather

Kukkura Jātaka



It was while staying at Jetavana that the Buddha told this story about acting for the good of relatives.

Long, long ago, when Brahmadata was reigning in Bārānasi, the Bodhisatta was born as a dog. He lived in a great charnel ground as the leader of a pack of several hundred dogs.

One day, the king rode out to his pleasure garden in the royal chariot drawn by milk-white horses. After amusing himself all day in the garden, he returned to the city, well after sunset. Hungry and tired, the king's men hurriedly unhitched the horses, but they left the chariot in the courtyard, with harness and reins still attached. During the night, it rained heavily.

The next morning, the grooms discovered that the leather of the chariot and harness had gotten wet and had been gnawed. They immediately went to the king. "Sire," they reported, "Your Majesty's chariot has been ruined. It seems that, during the night, dogs entered the courtyard through the sewers and gnawed the straps and the

beautiful leatherwork covering the chariot."

Enraged, the king shouted, "Kill every dog you see."

The king's soldiers immediately began roaming the streets of the city, killing every dog they found. The dogs were terrified by this wanton slaughter and sought safety in the charnel ground.

"Why are you here in such great numbers?" asked the chief. "What is happening?"

"The king is so infuriated by reports that dogs gnawed the leatherwork and straps of his carriage," they answered, "that he has ordered that all dogs be killed. Throughout the city, dogs are being destroyed wholesale. We are in great danger!"

The leader thought about this and reasoned to himself, "The palace is closely guarded. It would be impossible for an animal from outside to get inside. This must have been done by the king's own thoroughbred dogs, but now innocent creatures are being executed, while there is no punishment for the real culprits. I must try to save the lives of these dogs, my followers."

He comforted his relatives, saying, "Have no fear! I will save you, but to do it, I must see the king."

Protecting himself with thoughts of loving-kindness and calling to mind the Ten Perfections, the leader stealthily made his way alone into the city. Because of his kindly thoughts, he was able to reach the palace safely without encountering anyone.

He ran straight to the Hall of Justice, where the king was seated, and dived under the throne. The king's servants tried to catch him, but the king stopped them.

Emboldened by this, the great dog emerged from under the throne, bowed to the king, and asked, "Sire, was it you who ordered that all the dogs be destroyed?"

"Yes, it was I."

"What was their offense, Your Majesty?"

"Dogs gnawed the harness straps and the beautiful leatherwork of my chariot and ruined it."

"Do you know which dogs actually did the mischief?"

"No, I do not."

"But, Your Majesty, if you do not know for certain who the real culprits are, is it right to order that every dog be destroyed?"

"It's very simple. Dogs gnawed the leather of my carriage, so I ordered that all dogs be killed. That way, I am sure to punish the guilty dogs."

“Do your men kill all dogs without exception, or are there some dogs who are spared?”

“Some are spared, of course. I am not going to kill the thoroughbred dogs of my own palace.”

“Sire, just now, you said that you had ordered the slaughter of all dogs because dogs had gnawed the leather of your chariot. Now you say that the thoroughbred dogs of your own palace are spared. In this, you are following four evil ways—partiality, dislike, ignorance, and fear. Such behavior is wrong, and not king-like. When a king tries a case, he should be as unbiased as the beam of a balance. In this instance, however, you are allowing the royal dogs to go free, while you are mercilessly massacring poor stray dogs. What you are carrying out is not the impartial destruction of all dogs, but rather the slaughter of the poor. Your Majesty is not acting with justice!”

The king listened carefully and replied, “You speak wisely, and I am impressed. Tell me. In your wisdom, do you know who actually gnawed the leather of my chariot?”

“Yes, Sire, I do.”

“Who was it?”

“It was the thoroughbred dogs of your palace.”

“Can you prove this?”

“I will demonstrate it to you.”

“Do so, wise creature.”

“Please provide me with a little buttermilk and kusa grass, and send for your dogs.”

When this was done, the great dog instructed the king’s men to mash the grass, to stir it into the buttermilk, and to feed it to the thoroughbred dogs.

A few minutes after the dogs had drunk the mixture, they began to vomit. When the king’s men examined the vomit which the palace dogs had brought up, they discovered bits of leather.

“There is your evidence, Sire!” the wise dog exclaimed.

“What a perfect judgment!” cried the king. He was so pleased that he offered the royal umbrella to the king of the dogs, who established the king in the five precepts. Then he returned the white umbrella of kingship and encouraged the king to be steadfast and righteous.

The king immediately ordered that the slaughter of dogs be stopped and, further, that all dogs be given food fit for the king himself. The

king was so moved by the teaching that he also ordered that the lives of all creatures in the realm be protected. He spent the rest of his life in generosity and other good deeds and, when he died, was reborn in heaven. The wise dog lived to a ripe old age before passing away to fare according to his deserts. His teaching endured for ten thousand years.

Having concluded his story, the Buddha identified the birth: "At that time, Ānanda was the king, my followers were the dogs of the pack, and I was their wise leader."

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