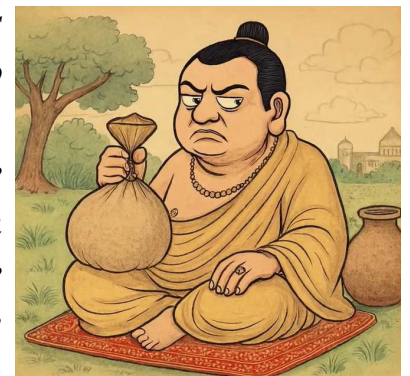


# The Miserly Treasurer

## *Ill sa J taka*



*It was while staying at Jetavana that the Buddha told this story about Kosiya, a tremendously rich royal treasurer, who lived in a town called Sakkara near the city of R jagaha. Because he was so tight-fisted that he couldn't bear to give away even the tiniest drop of oil which you could pick up with a blade of grass, he was called Maccharikosiya, Kosiya the Miser. Perhaps as bad as his stinginess was the fact that he wouldn't even use that minuscule amount for his own satisfaction. His vast wealth was actually of no use to him or to his family, let alone to deserving or needy people.*



*One day, as Maccharikosiya was returning home, he saw a half-starved farmhand eating a small round cake filled with rice gruel, and the mere sight aroused a fierce craving. Maccharikosiya wanted very much to have a cake like that, but he was so afraid of what to his mind was the ruinous expense of having to share the cakes with someone else that he dared not mention his craving to anyone. He endured his suffering as long as he could, but, finally, after closing all the doors and windows of*

the house, he told his wife about it in a very soft whisper. He instructed her to collect all the ingredients and utensils and to take them to the top floor of the house. There she was to cook cakes for him to eat, alone and undisturbed.

The next morning, when the Buddha surveyed the world from his Perfumed Chamber in Jetavana, he became aware that Maccharikosiya and his wife were ripe for conversion.

The Buddha summoned Venerable Moggallāna and said, “In Sakkara, forty-five yojanas from here, Maccharikosiya and his wife are on the seventh floor of their house. She is cooking cakes for him, and he is, at this moment, getting ready to eat them all alone. Go there, teach him, and use your power to transport both him and his wife, along with the cakes, here to Jetavana. I will be waiting here with five hundred bhikkhus, and those cakes will suffice for our meal.”

Because of his extraordinary power, a moment later, Venerable Moggallāna was standing in mid-air outside Maccharikosiya’s seventh-floor window. The unexpected sight of the bhikkhu with his almsbowl infuriated the miser. “I climbed all the way up here to escape such unwelcome visitors,” he thought, “and now there’s one at the window!”

He shouted, “What do you think you’re going to get, standing there in mid-air? You can walk up and down until you’ve worn a path in the air, but you will still get nothing at all!”

Venerable Moggallāna began to walk back and forth.

That provoked Maccharikosiya to greater anger. “You can sit cross-legged in meditation in the air,” he shouted, “but you will still get nothing at all!”

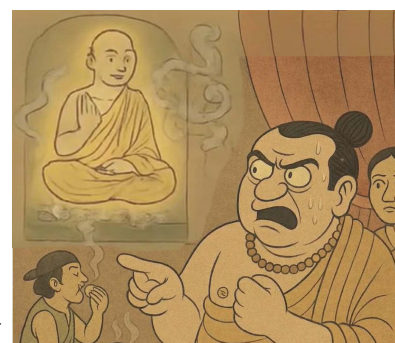
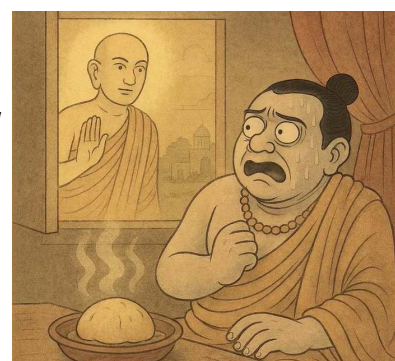
Venerable Moggallāna crossed his legs and began meditating.

Maccharikosiya’s face became red. “You can stand on the window sill,” he fumed, “but you will still get nothing at all!”

Venerable Moggallāna stepped onto the window sill. Maccharikosiya’s blood began to boil. “You can belch smoke, for all I care,” he shrieked, “but you will still get nothing at all!” Venerable Moggallāna belched smoke which filled the entire room, and the miser’s eyes began to burn. The miser was about to dare the visitor to burst into flames, but he caught himself, realizing that that might burn down his house.

“This bhikkhu is certainly persistent!” he thought. “He won’t go away empty-handed! I’ll have to give him one little cake to make him leave me alone.”

He cupped his hand in front of his mouth and whispered, “Wife, cook one tiny



cake and give it to that bhikkhu to get rid of him.”

His wife obediently measured a small amount of the ingredients and began stirring. For no apparent reason, the dough began to swell and soon formed a large ball which filled the crock.

“You’ve made too much dough!” the miser complained. “Let me do it!” He grabbed the spoon from her hand and scooped up a tiny bit of the dough, which immediately swelled into an enormous cake.

Completely frustrated, he told his wife to give the bhikkhu one of the cakes that was already cooked. She reached into the basket and took one of the cakes, but all the other cakes stuck to it. She tried to put the other cakes back in the basket, but, try as they might, neither she nor her husband could separate them.

While Maccharikosiya was struggling, all his craving for the cakes died. “I don’t want these cakes anymore,” he declared to his wife. “Give the whole basket of them to this bhikkhu.”

As soon as Venerable Moggall na saw that the miser’s mind had softened, he began to speak. He proclaimed the excellence of the Triple Gem, encouraged the couple in generosity, and taught the Dhamma.

Convinced, Maccharikosiya invited Venerable Moggall na to enter and to receive the cakes properly.

“Kosiya,” Venerable Moggall na replied, “the Omniscient Buddha is waiting in a monastery with five hundred bhikkhus for a meal of cakes. Please gather all of these delicacies, bring your wife, and come with me. We will go together to the Master.”

“Where is the Buddha waiting?” Kosiya asked. “In Jetavana, which is in S vatth .”

“But, Venerable Sir,” Kosiya objected, “that is forty-five yojanas from here! How can we go there?”

“If you wish, I will transport you there by my power. It will take no longer than going downstairs,” Venerable Moggall na replied.

Venerable Moggall na moved the bottom of the staircase to the gate of Jetavana, and they arrived at exactly the proper time for the meal.

The treasurer poured the Water of Donation, and his wife began serving cakes. By the power of the Buddha, the cakes multiplied, and she was able to offer one to the Blessed One and to each of the five hundred bhikkhus. From



*a never-ending supply, Kosiya was able to serve them milk, ghee, honey, and jaggery, as well.*

*After the bhikkhus had finished, there were still ample cakes and condiments for Kosiya, his wife, and all the temple boys to eat their fill. Astonished that there were still as many cakes as they had brought, they asked the Buddha what they should do with the leftovers. He instructed them to throw them away. Accordingly, they cast them into a cave near Jetavana, and that cave is still called The Cave of the Crock, after the pot which held the cake dough.*

*The Buddha offered anumodana, and, as he finished, both Kosiya and his wife attained the first path.*

*The couple paid their respects to the Buddha and stepped onto the staircase at the gate of Jetavana. Immediately, they found themselves back in their own home.*

*That evening, while the bhikkhus were sitting together in the Hall of Truth, one said, “How great is the power of Moggallāna! In a moment, he converted the miser to generosity, brought him and his wife to Jetavana, and made it possible for them to attain the first path.”*

*“How remarkable, indeed, is Moggallāna!” the others agreed.*

*The Buddha entered and asked what they were discussing.*

*They told him, and the Buddha replied, “A bhikkhu who visits a household should approach without causing disturbance, in the same way that a bee takes nectar from the flower without harming its scent or its hue. Bhikkhus, this is not the first time that Moggallāna has converted this miserly treasurer. Long ago, too, he taught the miser how deeds and their effects are linked together.” Then the Buddha told this story of the past.*

Long, long ago, when Brahmādatta was reigning in B r nasi, there was a treasurer named Ill sa, who was worth eighty crores. This man had all the defects possible in a person. He was lame and hunch-backed, and he had a squint. He was a confirmed miser, never giving away any of his fortune to others, yet never enjoying it himself.

Interestingly enough, however, for seven generations back, his ancestors had been bountiful, giving freely of their best. When this treasurer inherited the family riches, he broke that tradition and began hoarding his wealth.

One day, as he was returning from an audience with the king, he saw a weary peasant sitting on a bench and drinking a mug of cheap liquor with great gusto. The sight made the treasurer thirsty for a drink of liquor himself, but he thought, “If I drink, others will want to drink with me. That would mean a ruinous expense!” The more he tried to suppress his thirst, the stronger the craving grew.

The effort to overcome his thirst made him as yellow as old cotton. He became

thinner and thinner, and the veins stood out on his emaciated frame. After a few days, still unable to forget about the liquor, he went into his room and lay down, hugging his bed. His wife came in, rubbed his back, and asked, "Husband, what is wrong?"

"Nothing," he said.

"Perhaps the king is angry with you," she suggested.

"No, he is not."

"Have your children or servants done anything to annoy you?" she queried.

"Not at all."

"Well, then, do you have a craving for something?"

Because of his preposterous fear that he might waste his fortune, he still would not say a word.

"Speak, husband," she pleaded. "Tell me what you have a craving for."

"Well," he said slowly, "I do have a craving for one thing."

"What is that, my husband?"

"I want a drink of liquor," he whispered.

"Why didn't you say so before?" she exclaimed with relief. "I'll brew enough liquor to serve the whole town."

"No!" he cried. "Don't bother about other people. Let them earn their own drink!"

"Well then, I'll make just enough for our street."

"How rich you are!"

"Then, just for our household."

"How extravagant!"

"All right, only us and our children."

"Why fuss about them?"

"Very well, let it be just enough for the two of us."

"Do you need any?"

"Of course not. I'll brew a little liquor only for you."

"Wait! If you brew any liquor in the house, many people will see you. In fact, it's out of the question to drink any here at all." Producing one single penny, he sent a slave to buy a jar of liquor from the tavern.

When the slave returned, Ill sa ordered him to carry the liquor out of town to a remote thicket near the river. "Now leave me alone!" Ill sa commanded. After the slave had walked some distance away, the treasurer crawled into the thicket, filled his cup, and began drinking.

At that moment, the treasurer's own father, who had been reborn as Sakka, happened to be wondering whether the tradition of generosity was still kept up in his house and became aware of his son's outrageous behavior. He realized that his son had not only broken with the customary magnanimity of his family but that he

had also burned down the alms-halls and beaten the poor to drive them away from his gate. Sakka saw that his son, unwilling to share even a drop of cheap liquor with anyone else, was sitting in a thicket drinking by himself.

“I must make my son see that deeds always have their consequences!” Sakka exclaimed. “I will make him charitable and worthy of rebirth in T vatimsa.”

Instantly, Sakka disguised himself as his son, complete with his limp, hunch-back, and squint, and entered the city of B r nasi. He went directly to the palace gate and asked to be announced to the king.

“Let him approach,” said the king.

Sakka entered the king’s chamber and paid his respects.

“What brings you here at this unusual hour, my Lord High Treasurer?” asked the king.

“I have come, Sire, because I would like to add my eighty crores of wealth to your royal treasury.”

“No!” answered the king. “I have ample treasure. I have no need of yours.”

“Sire, if you will not take it, I will give it all away to others.”

“By all means, Treasurer, do as you wish.”

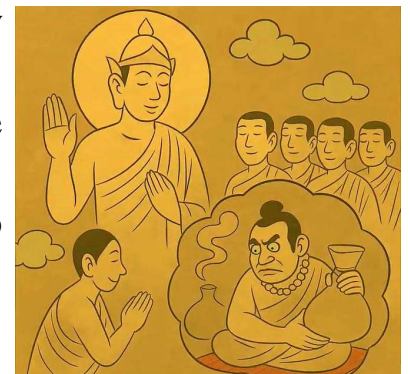
“So be it, Sire,” Sakka said. Bowing again to the king, he went to Ill sa’s house. None of the servants could tell that he was not their real master. He sent for the porter and ordered, “If anybody resembling me should appear and claim to be master of this house, that person should be severely beaten and thrown out.” He went upstairs, sat down on a brocaded couch, and sent for Ill sa’s wife. When she arrived, he smiled and said, “My dear, let us be bountiful.”

When his wife heard this, she thought, “I’ve never seen him in this frame of mind. He must have drunk a lot to have become so good-natured and generous!” Aloud she said, “Be as charitable as you please, my husband.”

“Send for the town crier,” Sakka ordered. “I want him to announce to all the citizens of the city that anybody who wants gold, silver, diamonds, pearls, or other gems should come to the house of Ill sa the Treasurer.”

His wife obeyed him, and a large crowd of people carrying baskets and sacks soon gathered. Sakka instructed the servants to open the doors to the store rooms and announced to the people, “These are my gifts to you! Take what you like! Good luck to you!”

Townpeople filled their bags and carried away all the treasure they could manage. One farmer yoked two of Ill sa’s oxen to a beautiful cart, filled it with valuable things, and drove out of the city. As he rode along, humming a tune in praise of the treasurer, he happened to pass near the thicket where Ill sa was hiding.



“May you live to be one hundred, my good lord Ill sa!” sang the farmer. “What you have done for me this day will enable me to live without ever toiling again. Who owned these oxen? You did! Who gave me this cart? You did! Who gave me the wealth in the cart? Again it was you! Neither my father nor my mother gave me any of this. No, it came solely from you, my lord.”

These words chilled the treasurer to the bone. “Why is this fellow mentioning my name?” he wondered. “Has the king been giving away my wealth?” He peeped out of the thicket and immediately recognized his own cart and oxen.

Scrambling out of the bushes as fast as he could, he grabbed the oxen by their nose rings and cried, “Stop! These oxen belong to me!” The farmer leaped from the cart and began beating the interloper. “You rascal!” he shouted. “This is none of your business. Ill sa the Treasurer is giving his wealth away to all the city.” He knocked the treasurer down, climbed back on the cart, and started to drive away.

Shaking with anger, Ill sa picked himself up, hurried after the cart, and seized hold of the oxen again. Once more, the farmer jumped down, grabbed Ill sa by the hair, and beat him severely. Then he got back on the cart and rumbled off.

Thoroughly sobered up by this rough handling, Ill sa hurried home. When he arrived, he saw the people carrying away his treasure. “What are you doing?” he shouted. “How dare you do this?” He seized first one man and then another, but every man he grabbed knocked him down.

Bruised and bleeding, he tried to go into his own house, claiming that he was Ill sa, but the porters stopped him. “You villain!” they cried. “Where do you think you are going?” Following orders, they beat him with bamboo staves, took him by the neck, and threw him down the steps.

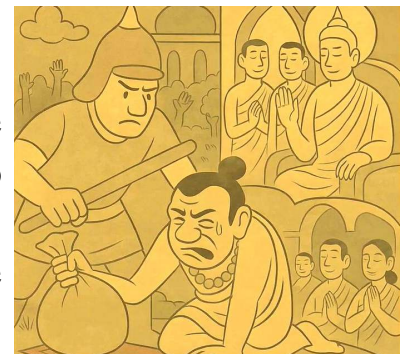
“Only the king can help me now,” groaned Ill sa, and he dragged himself to the palace.

“Sire!” he cried. “Why, oh why, have you plundered me like this?”

“I haven’t plundered you, sir,” said the king. “You yourself first offered me your wealth. Then you yourself offered your property to the citizens of the town.”

“Sire, I never did such a thing! Your Majesty knows how careful I am about money. You know I would never give away so much as the tiniest drop of oil. May it please Your Majesty to send for the person who has squandered my riches. Please interrogate him about this matter.”

The king ordered his guards to bring Ill sa, and they returned with Sakka. The two treasurers were so much alike that neither the king nor anyone else in the court could tell which was the real treasurer. “Sire!” pleaded Ill sa. “I am the treasurer! This is an imposter!”



“My dear sir,” replied the king. “I really can’t say which of you is the real Ill sa. Is there anybody who can distinguish for certain between the two of you?”

“Yes, Sire,” answered Ill sa, “my wife can.”

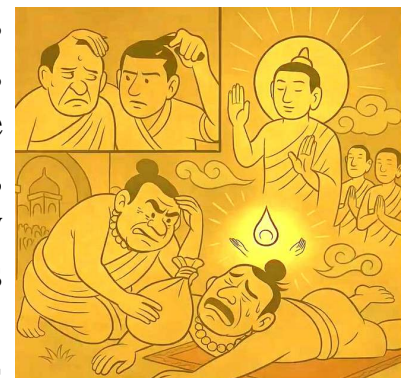
The king sent for Ill sa’s wife and asked her which of the two was her husband. She smiled at Sakka and went to stand beside him. When Ill sa’s children and servants were brought and asked the same question, they all answered that Sakka was the real treasurer.

Suddenly, Ill sa remembered that he had a wart on the top of his head, hidden under his hair, known only to his barber. As a last resort, he asked that his barber be called. The barber came and was asked if he could distinguish the real Ill sa from the false.

“Of course, I can tell, Sire,” he said, “if I may examine their heads.”

“By all means, look at both their heads,” ordered the king.

The barber examined Ill sa’s head and found the wart. As he started to examine Sakka’s head, the king of the devas quickly caused a wart to appear on his own head, and the barber exclaimed, “Your Majesty, both squint, both limp, and both are hunchbacks, too! Both have warts in exactly the same place on their heads! Even I cannot tell which is the real Ill sa!”



When Ill sa heard this, he realized that his last hope was gone, and he began to quake at the loss of his beloved riches. Overpowered by his emotions, he collapsed senseless on the floor.

At this, Sakka resumed his divine form and rose into the air. “Your Majesty, I am not Ill sa,” he announced. “I am Sakka!”

The king’s courtiers quickly splashed water on Ill sa’s face to revive him. As soon as he had recovered his wits, the treasurer staggered to his feet and bowed before Sakka.

“Ill sa!” Sakka shouted. “That wealth was mine, not yours. I was your father. In my lifetime, I was bountiful towards the poor and rejoiced in doing good. Because of my generosity, I was reborn in this great grandeur. But you, foolish man, are not walking in my footsteps. You have become a terrible miser. In order to hoard my riches, you burned my alms-halls to the ground and drove away the poor. You are getting no enjoyment from your wealth; nor is it benefiting any other human being. Your treasury is like a pool haunted by yakkhas, from which no one may satisfy his thirst.

“If you rebuild my alms-halls, however, and show generosity to the poor, you will gain great merit. If you do not, I will take away everything you have, and I will split your head with my thunderbolt.”

When Ill sa heard this threat, he shook with fear and cried out, “From now on I will be bountiful! I swear it!”

Accepting this promise, Sakka established his son in the precepts, preached the Law to him, and returned to T vatimsa.

True to his word, Ill sa became diligent in generosity and performed many good deeds. He even attained rebirth in heaven.



*Having concluded his story, the Buddha added, “Thus, you see, Bhikkhus, that this is not the first time that Moggall na has converted this miserly treasurer. Then the Buddha identified the birth: “At that time, the treasurer was Ill sa; Moggall na was Sakka; nanda was the king; and I was the barber.”*

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The small illustrations are from an animated video:

“Illisa Jataka - The Miserly Millionaire Tortured | Jataka Tales - Sariputta Indonesia”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sR3jJ-HmDek>