

Always Hungry

Losaka Jātaka



It was while staying at Jetavana that the Buddha told this story about Venerable Losaka Tissa.

In Kosala, there was a prosperous fishing-village with one thousand families. One day, all the fishermen went out with their nets to the rivers and ponds, as they did every morning, but, when evening came, not one of them had caught a single fish. They were astonished for this had never happened before in the entire history of the village. From that day on, bad fortune dogged the village. The catch was never good. Moreover, disaster struck the village with uncanny frequency. Within the space of only eight months, fire destroyed all the houses seven times. Another seven times, the king punished the village by demanding extra taxes. Reeling from these calamities, the villagers wondered why their fortune had suddenly changed so drastically. They concluded that someone among them must have been causing the misfortune. To find out who it was, they decided to divide the village into two groups of five hundred families each.

Sure enough, the next day, one group caught more fish than they could carry, but the other team returned empty-handed. The unlucky group again divided into two, and again only one group caught no fish. The unlucky fishermen continued dividing themselves into groups until they discovered that the cause of the bad fortune was one family. Not only was the wife pregnant, but it seemed certain that the bad fortune had begun on the day she conceived. The villagers all joined together and drove that family away, and the village soon regained its former prosperity.

That family, on the other hand, led a miserable existence. The wife had great difficulty finding enough food to sustain herself during pregnancy, but, when the time came, she gave birth to a son. No matter how much she neglected him and deprived him of food, he survived as though his life was charmed. His parents stayed with him until he could run about, but then, one day, his mother put a broken shard in his hands and sent him off to beg. She and her husband went to another village, leaving him to fend for himself.

Abandoned, the boy scrounged for food the best he could. He never took a bath, and he had no decent clothes, so he looked like a mudgoblin.¹ At the age of seven, he found

1. *Pamsupisācako*, a kind of peta.

himself in Sāvattthī, living like a crow, picking up and eating, lump by lump, any food he could find in the back alleys, where people threw away the scrapings of the ricepots and other garbage.

One morning, as Venerable Sāriputta was entering Sāvattthī for alms, he noticed the child and was immediately filled with loving-kindness towards him. “Come here,” he called.

The child obediently approached, bowed to the bhikkhu, and stood before him.

“What village do you belong to?” Venerable Sāriputta asked him gently. “Where are your parents?”

“I live by myself on the street, sir,” the child answered. “My parents said they were tired of misfortune, abandoned me, and went away.” As the boy stood there, Venerable Sāriputta could see how scrawny he was.

“Would you like to become a bhikkhu?” he asked the boy.

The boy’s eyes became very wide, and he answered in a soft voice, “Indeed I would, sir, but who would sponsor a poor wretch like me?”

“I would.”

“Then I want to become a bhikkhu.”

Venerable Sāriputta took the boy to the monastery, bathed him, and gave him a meal. That same day, the boy was ordained as a sāmanera, and, when he was old enough, he received full ordination as a bhikkhu, with the name Losaka Tissa.

Even as a bhikkhu, Venerable Losaka Tissa continued to be plagued by bad luck. Whenever alms were given, no matter how lavish the generosity, Venerable Losaka Tissa never got enough to eat. After a single ladle of rice had been placed in his bowl, the bowl appeared full to the brim so that donors skipped him and offered the rest of the rice to the others. When it came time for curry, just as the food was to be put in his bowl, the dishes seemed to vanish, and he never got any.

In time, Venerable Losaka Tissa developed perfect insight and attained arahatship, but he still got very little to eat, and he was always hungry. One morning, Venerable Sāriputta realized that Venerable Losaka Tissa would pass away that day. “Today,” he declared, “I will see that Losaka Tissa has enough to eat.”

He summoned Venerable Losaka Tissa, and together they walked to Sāvattthī for alms. Because Venerable Losaka was with him, however, Venerable Sāriputta received absolutely nothing. Realizing what was the matter, he asked Venerable Losaka to go back to the monastery and wait for him. Proceeding on his almsrounds alone, he quickly managed to collect plenty of food as he always before had in that wealthy and generous city. Venerable Sāriputta instructed several other bhikkhus to carry the food back to Jetavana and to offer it to Venerable Losaka Tissa.

Those bhikkhus unaccountably forgot about Venerable Losaka Tissa and ate all of the food themselves. After finishing his own meal, Venerable Sāriputta returned to Jetavana and went to Venerable Losaka Tissa's chamber. "Well, Brother," he asked cheerfully, "did you get the food and enjoy your lunch?"

"I shall, no doubt, get it in good time," Venerable Losaka Tissa answered. Venerable Sāriputta understood what had happened, but, since it was past noon, it was too late for a bhikkhu to eat a meal.

"Please stay here, Friend," said Venerable Sāriputta; "and wait for my return." He went with his bowl to the palace of the king. As soon as King Pasenadi saw Venerable Sāriputta, he ordered that his bowl be taken and filled with catumadhu. Venerable Sāriputta carried the bowl back to Venerable Losaka Tissa, stood before him, holding the bowl, and told him to eat.

Because of his reverence for Venerable Sāriputta, Venerable Losaka Tissa would not touch the catumadhu.

"Please, Friend," Venerable Sāriputta gently urged him, "sit down and eat. I must stand here with the bowl. If the bowl were to leave my hand, everything in it would vanish!"

With respect and admiration for Venerable Sāriputta's kindness and compassion, Venerable Losaka Tissa ate the sweet mixture. Because of Venerable Sāriputta's merit and power, the food did not disappear. Venerable Losaka Tissa was able to eat as much as he wanted and was satisfied. That day, as Venerable Sāriputta had foreseen, Venerable Losaka Tissa passed away, never to be reborn again. His kamma was extinguished.

The Buddha attended his cremation and ordered that a cetiya be built for the collected ashes.

Shortly after this, a group of bhikkhus was sitting in the hall and talking about Venerable Losaka Tissa. "Losaka Tissa," one of them said, "was always unlucky, and little was given to him. I wonder how, with all his bad luck, he was able to win the glory of arahatship." When the Buddha heard what they were discussing, he said, "Bhikkhus, Losaka Tissa's actions were the cause of both his receiving so little and his becoming an arahat. Long ago, he had prevented others from receiving, and that was why he received so little himself. He won arahatship for himself, however, by meditating on suffering, impermanence, and the absence of self in all things." Then he told this story of the past.

Long, long ago, in the days of Kassapa Buddha, there was a young bhikkhu living in a small village monastery. He was supported by a well-to-do landowner. The bhikkhu was proper in conduct, and the landowner was pious.

One day, a senior bhikkhu came to that village and stopped in front of the landowner's house, seeking alms. Being impressed with this bhikkhu's demeanor, the landowner took his bowl, led him into the house, paid him every respect, and offered him food.

After eating, the bhikkhu gave him a short discourse. Thoroughly delighted, the man invited him to stay. "Venerable Sir," he said, "There is a monastery close by. Please stay there for the night. I would like to call on you there this evening."

Silently agreeing, the bhikkhu went to the monastery and formally greeted the resident bhikkhu, who received him with all friendliness and asked whether he had received alms that morning.

"Oh yes," he replied.

"Where was that?"

"In the village, at the landowner's house."

Then the senior bhikkhu asked to be shown his room. Putting down his bowl and outer robe, he seated himself in meditation and, being an arahat, began enjoying the bliss of arahatship.

That evening, the landowner went to the monastery, accompanied by servants carrying flowers, incense, lamps, and oil. He paid his respects to the resident bhikkhu and asked whether a guest, a senior bhikkhu, had appeared. The resident bhikkhu replied that he had and indicated which room he had been given. The man went to that room, bowed respectfully to the arahat, seated himself at one side, and listened to a discourse. After the discourse was completed, in the cool of the evening, the landowner lit lamps and incense at the cetiya and Bodhi tree. Before returning to the village, he announced to the resident bhikkhu that he would like to offer a meal the next day to the two bhikkhus and asked him to bring the senior bhikkhu to the house at the proper time.

The resident bhikkhu began to feel threatened by the new arrival. He sat in his room thinking, "This landowner is very pious, and he is obviously impressed by this learned bhikkhu. If this bhikkhu decides to stay here, I could easily lose my place and might soon count for nothing." The more he speculated, the more upset he became. Indeed, he spent most of the night scheming how to make sure that the other bhikkhu did not decide to stay in the monastery.

Early the next morning, the senior bhikkhu went to greet the resident bhikkhu. He tapped on the door, but the resident bhikkhu neither opened the door nor spoke in response. Being an arahat, the senior bhikkhu understood what the other was thinking. "This bhikkhu," he said to himself, "does not realize that I would never trouble him nor threaten his relationship with the landowner who supports him." He returned to his own room and became absorbed in the bliss of his meditation.

When it was time to go, the resident bhikkhu tapped softly on the gong and knocked almost silently on the other's door. Getting no response, he hurried off alone to the landowner's house. His host offered him a seat and immediately asked about the other bhikkhu.

"I have no idea where he is," replied the young bhikkhu. "I struck the gong and knocked on his door, but he did not come out. He must still be sleeping. I suppose that the food yesterday disagreed with him and that he is still in bed not feeling well."

The landowner served the bhikkhu a delicious meal of succulent curries with rice cooked in milk and mixed with ghee, sugar, and honey. After he had finished, servants scoured the bowl and refilled it. "Venerable Sir," the landowner said to the bhikkhu, returning the bowl full of food, "that visiting bhikkhu must be very tired from his journey. Please take this food to him so that he may take his lunch before noon."

The resident bhikkhu accepted the food and went back toward the monastery. As he was walking, he thought, "If our friend gets a taste of this delicious rice, I will never get rid of him, even if I grab him by the throat and throw him out. I can't let him have it, but how can I get rid of it? If I give it away, everyone will talk about it. If I throw it into the river, the ghee will float on the water, and people will see it. If I just throw it away, it will attract crows, and, again, everyone will know what I have done."

Just then, he came to a field that had recently been burned. Very stealthily, he stepped into the field, scraped a shallow hole in the ground, dumped the contents of his bowl into the hole, and covered it with soil and ashes. Then he returned to the monastery with the empty bowl.

In the meantime, the other bhikkhu had washed, dressed, taken his bowl, and gone elsewhere to seek alms, intending never to return.

When the resident bhikkhu found the empty chamber, he realized that the visitor had perceived his jealousy and had left because of it. "Woe is me!" he cried, "My greed has made me commit a dreadful sin! I have prevented the landowner's alms from being offered; I have deprived a senior bhikkhu of his portion; I have abused the requisites; and I have violated my livelihood as a bhikkhu! All for greed! All for greed!" From that day on, he was tormented by guilt and began to look and to act like a ghost. Not long after that, he passed away and was reborn in hell, where he suffered horribly for hundreds of thousands of years.

For five hundred successive births, he was a yakkha and never had enough to eat, except on one occasion when he enjoyed a surfeit of filth. For the next five hundred births, he was a pariah dog. As a dog, too, there was only one occasion when he had enough to eat, and that was when he happened to find a mess of vomit.

Finally, he was reborn as a human being, but it was into a lowly beggar family in a village in Kāsi. As soon as he was born, the family's fortune, that is, their misery, turned from bad to worse. They named him Mittavindaka. As a baby, he never got enough milk from his mother's emaciated breasts, and, as a child, he never got even half as much watery gruel as he wanted.

When his parents finally realized that he was the cause of their misfortune and hunger, they beat him, shouting, "Begone, you curse!" and drove him away.

In the course of his wanderings, the little outcast arrived in Bārānasi, which, at that time, was a remarkably progressive and wealthy city. Even poor boys had their daily rations provided along with their studies. Thus young Mittavindaka became a charity scholar under a renowned teacher who had five hundred other young students.

Despite his improved fortune, Mittavindaka was always fighting with his fellow students. Furthermore, he was extremely disrespectful toward his teacher. Because of Mittavindaka's unruly behavior, the teacher's fees declined. The master tried to reason with him and to correct some of his most obvious faults, but Mittavindaka was intractable. He decided to run away and found himself in a border village, where he was able to eke out an existence by teaching the rudiments of reading, writing, and arithmetic. The villagers paid him a small salary and gave him a hut at the edge of the village. He married a miserably poor woman and had two children.

Shortly after Mittavindaka arrived, the fortune of that village changed for the worse. Seven times the king's vengeance fell on the villagers; seven times their homes were burned to the ground; and seven times their water tank dried up.

Finally, the villagers realized that Mittavindaka was, indeed, the cause of their misfortunes. Armed with staves, they surrounded his hut and drove him and his family away. Scrounging for food, the little family walked on until they came to a wild jungle, where they were attacked by yakkhas. Mittavindaka was able to escape, but the yakkhas killed his wife and children and ate them.

Once again, Mittavindaka wandered alone, surviving as best he could. Eventually, he came to Gambhīra, a village on the coast. On that very day, there was a ship putting out to sea, and Mittavindaka was able to secure a position on board. For a week the ship sailed steadily on course, but, on the seventh day, it came to a complete standstill in mid-ocean, as though it had run upon a rock. Baffled by this strange occurrence, the crew cast lots, hoping to find the cause of their trouble. Seven times, the lot fell on Mittavindaka, so the other sailors gave him a bamboo raft and bade him farewell, not caring whether he survived or drowned. The instant Mittavindaka left the ship, it began sailing normally once more.

Mittavindaka clambered onto the bamboo raft and floated on the waves. Because he had earned a little merit as a bhikkhu in the time of Kassapa Buddha, he experienced some good fortune. His raft drifted to an isolated island, where he found a beautiful crystal palace. He approached the palace and was greeted by four lovely princesses. For seven days, he was lavishly entertained like a king in the palace. Mittavindaka was sure that his luck had finally turned and that he had, at last, found happiness in this paradise. Unfortunately, the princesses were actually vimāna-petas, who were condemned to alternate between seven days of joy in a divine palace and seven days of suffering in the peta realm. On the seventh day, they told Mittavindaka that they had to leave for a week, but they promised that they would return, and they begged him to wait.

Of course, Mittavindaka did not listen to them. Being impatient, he set off on his raft as soon as they were gone. Before long, he reached another island, where he was even more lavishly entertained by eight ghostly princesses in a silver palace. On the seventh day, they, too, announced that they were leaving for a week and asked him to wait. The same as before, Mittavindaka set out on his raft. Then he successively stayed for one week with sixteen princesses in a palace of jewels and thirty-two princesses in a golden palace.

After leaving the golden palace, Mittavindaka drifted for several days. As he was approaching another island, he expected to find another palace, but all he saw was a herd of goats on a stony beach. Since he was, of course, starving, he decided to make a meal of a goat. Not realizing that these goats were actually yakkhas, he impulsively grabbed the leg of one of the nanny-goats. With all her demonic strength, this yakkhinī gave him such a kick that he was hurled up and away over the ocean. He came down on a clump of thorns on the slopes of the dry moat of Bārānasi, the same city he had fled some years earlier.

That moat happened to be the hiding place of robbers, who regularly killed and roasted goats from the king's herd. At that particular time, however, the king's goatherds were hiding nearby, hoping to catch the thieves red-handed.

No sooner had Mittavindaka picked himself up and dusted himself off, than he spotted the king's goats, seemingly unattended. "Well," he thought, "I was kicked here by a goat on an island in the middle of the ocean. I wonder if one of these goats might just kick me back to one of those lovely islands where the princesses live in magnificent palaces. I should have stayed there in the first place. Let me take hold of the leg of that nanny-goat and see if it works."

Leaping forward, he grabbed the leg of the strong goat, closed his eyes, and waited to be hurled back to an island. Instead of kicking, however, the goat began bleating and

tried to run away. Instantly, the goatherds emerged from their hiding places, seized Mittavindaka, and shouted, “This is the thief who has been stealing the king’s goats!” They beat him severely, tied him up, and dragged him toward the city.

At that time, Mittavindaka’s former teacher was on his way to bathe at the river with some of his students and noticed the goatherds. Recognizing Mittavindaka, he asked why he had been arrested.

“Master,” the goatherds said, “we caught this thief in the act of stealing a goat. We are taking him to prison. The king will surely execute him.”

“Oh dear!” exclaimed the teacher. “Formerly, he was one of my students. I would hate to see him executed. Would you hand him over to me? He can be our servant, and I will guarantee that he causes no more trouble.”

The teacher commanded so much respect that the goatherds gladly agreed. They untied their prisoner and released him into the care of the teacher.

The teacher asked Mittavindaka where he had been, and Mittavindaka told him all that had happened.

“By not listening to those who wish you well,” the teacher told him, “you have suffered all those misfortunes.”

This time, Mittavindaka stayed with the teacher. After several years, both of them passed away, each faring according to his deserts.

Having concluded his story, the Buddha identified the birth: “At that time, Losaka Tissa was Mittavindaka, and I was the wise teacher in Bārānasi.”

From *Jataka Tales of the Buddha: An Anthology*, Retold by Ken and Visakha Kawasaki, Volume I, pp.99-108, Tale 23, Buddhist Cultural Centre, Dehiwala, Sri Lanka, 2012, © Ken and Visakha Kawasaki