



The First Lie *Cetiya Jataka*

It was while staying at Jetavana that the Buddha told this story about Devadatta.

One day, the bhikkhus were talking about how Devadatta, because he had spoken falsely, had been swallowed by the earth and had been reborn in Avici Hell. When the Buddha heard what they were discussing, he said, “This is not the first time that he has sunk into the earth.” Then he told this story of the past.

Long, long ago, in the first eon, a king named Maha-Sammata reigned in Sotthivati, the capital of Ceti. Maha-Sammata, who had an immeasurably long life-span, was succeeded by his son Roja, who was succeeded by his son Vararoja. After Vararoja, the succession of kings was Kalyana, Varakalyana, Uposatha, Varuposatha, Mandhata, Varamandhata, Cara, and Upacara.¹ King Upacara was endowed with four supernatural qualities: he could pass through the air, four devas protected him, his body had the fragrance of sandalwood, and his breath had the fragrance of lotuses.

Upacara had grown up with Korakalambaka, the younger brother of his father’s chief advisor, a brahmin named Kapila. Upacara and Korakalambaka had been playmates and had studied together under the same teacher. The prince had promised that, as king, he would appoint Korakalambaka his chief advisor. When he became king, however, he discovered that it was impossible to remove Kapila from his position. Because the advisor was so much older than he was, King Upacara treated him with deference. Kapila noticed this and was not comfortable with such a situation. He felt that the king would be happier with an advisor more his own age.

Actually, Kapila had been thinking about becoming an ascetic. He asked the king’s permission to resign and to appoint his son as his successor, and the king assented. Kapila instructed his son in all he needed to know to serve the king faithfully and wisely and had him installed as chief advisor. Confident that he had fulfilled all responsibilities, Kapila donned an ascetic’s robe and, wishing to stay near his son, retired to the royal park, where he attained proficiency in meditation. Disappointed at not becoming chief advisor, Korakalambaka developed a strong grudge against his brother.

One day, while the king and Korakalambaka were engaged in friendly conversation, the king asked, “My friend, how is it that you are not my chief advisor?”

“Sire, my brother arranged otherwise.”

“Hasn’t your brother already become an ascetic?”

“Yes, he has, but the post went to his son.”

¹Also called Apacara, who is regarded as one of the ancestors of the Sakyans.

“Well, why don’t you arrange things for yourself?”

“Sire, the post is hereditary, and I am the younger brother.”

“In that case, I will make you elder and him the younger.”

“How will you do that, Sire?”

“With a lie.”

“Sire, that would be extremely dangerous. My brother has great supernatural powers! He will destroy you for sure!”

“Don’t worry. I’ll take care of it!”

“When are you going to do it, Sire?”

“Exactly one week from today.”

Since the world was very young at this time, no one knew what a lie was. The news spread quickly around the city: “The king is going to make the senior the junior! The younger will become the elder! The post will go to the younger! He’s going to do it with a lie!” As this was repeated from person to person, the question everyone was asking was, “What is a lie?” People wondered, “Is it yellow?” “Is it blue?” “How big is it?” “Will we be able to see it?” “Will it have a smell?”

When the chief advisor heard the news, he went to the royal park and spoke to his father. “Father,” he said, “people are saying that the king is going to make you the younger brother and to give my post to my uncle. They say he’s going to do this with a lie.”

“My son,” the ascetic replied, “the king would not be able to do that with a lie! When do they say this will happen?”

“In seven days.”

“Remind me when the time comes,” the ascetic told his son and returned to his meditation.

On the day which the king had specified, hoping to see a lie and to discover what it was, a huge crowd gathered in the palace courtyard. The king dressed himself in full royal regalia and, using his supernatural powers, stood in the air above the multitude. The chief advisor informed his father that the time had come, and the ascetic, using his own supernatural powers, appeared in front of the king. He spread his antelope-skin rug and seated himself in mid-air.

“Is it true, Your Majesty,” the ascetic asked, “that, with a lie, you intend to make me the younger brother and to give Korakalambaka the post of chief advisor?”

“Yes, Master, that is true.”

“Your Majesty, a lie is a grievously dangerous thing,” the ascetic cautioned. “A lie utterly destroys all virtue and can cause rebirth in the four lower realms. With a lie one destroys Right and will himself be destroyed. With a lie, your supernatural qualities will disappear. Trust me, Sire, if you tell a lie, you will doom yourself!”

These dire pronouncements instilled great fear in the king. He glanced at Korakalambaka for reassurance. “Be strong, Your Majesty!” his friend whispered. “I told you my brother would try to use his magical powers. He just wants to change your mind. Use your own supernatural powers, and defeat him!”

This support from his friend, though mild, gave the king enough encouragement to defy Kapila's warning. "Sir," the king shouted, "I declare that Kapila is the younger and that Korakalambaka is the elder!" At that moment, his four guardian devas declared that they would not protect a liar. They threw down their swords and vanished. The king's breath became fetid, and his body reeked like a sewer. He fell crashing to the ground, and everyone understood that his supernatural powers had, indeed, disappeared just as Kapila had predicted.

"Sire!" the ascetic called out from his seat in the air. "This was a warning, but be not afraid! If you speak the truth now, everything will be restored to you."

"Kapila," the king replied, "you are just trying to trick me, aren't you? I declare that Kapila is the younger and that Korakalambaka is the elder!" As soon as he had repeated this lie, he sank up to the ankles in the earth.

"Your Majesty!" Kapila shouted. "To one who intentionally speaks a falsehood, drought comes in the rainy season, and rain falls when it should be dry! Because of your lie, you have sunk in the earth up to your ankles. I implore you! Speak now the truth, and you will regain your four supernatural qualities! All will be restored! If you maintain your lie, you will sink even deeper into the soil of Ceti."

Defiantly, the king repeated even louder, "Kapila is the younger, and Korakalambaka is the elder!" Instantly, he sank up to his knees.

"Sire!" Kapila called out once more. "If you persist in lying, you will sink deeper into the earth! One word of truth will restore all your gifts! It is not too late, Your Majesty!"

Completely ignoring Kapila's warning, the king stubbornly repeated, "Kapila is the younger, and Korakalambaka is the elder!" Instantly, he sank up to his hips.

"Your Majesty!" Kapila shouted. "One who tells a lie will be abandoned even by his own children! No one will support a liar! You still have time to save yourself! Proclaim the truth, and all your glory will return! Lie, and you will sink deeper! Think carefully, Your Majesty!"

A fifth time, the king declared, "Kapila is the younger, and Korakalambaka is the elder!" Instantly, he sank up to his navel.

"Sire!" Kapila shouted once more. "He who speaks an intentional lie will father no sons! If you maintain your lie, I assure you that you will sink even deeper, but it is still not too late! Declare the truth, and all will be restored!"

The king paid no attention. For the sixth time he shouted, "Kapila is the younger, and Korakalambaka is the elder!" Instantly, he sank up to his chest.

"Your Majesty!" Kapila pleaded. "This is your final warning! Your Majesty, consider your five sons! If you persist in lying, you will lose everything, including your own life! Quickly! Speak the truth, and all will be regained! Save yourself before it is too late! Forego your lie, and speak the truth!"

Maintaining his support for his jealous friend and ignoring the advice of the wise, King Upacara declared a seventh time, "Kapila is the younger, and Korakalambaka is the elder!" Suddenly, a great chasm opened wide, the flames of Avici leaped up, and the king fell into that dreadful hell.

A cry of fear arose from the multitude: “Avici! Now we have seen the power of a lie! With his lie, the king maligned a wise man! He has fallen into hell!”

The king’s five sons prostrated themselves in front of the ascetic and said, “Sir, we appeal to you for refuge!”

“By persisting in falsehood and forsaking the truth, your father doomed himself to hell,” replied the ascetic. “In destroying Right, your father also renounced his great lineage. The line of kingship has been broken, and you must no longer stay here.”

To the eldest prince he said, “Dear boy, leave the city by the eastern gate, and continue walking straight in that direction until you find a royal white elephant in the seven-point prostration.² That will be your sign, and, on that site, you are to lay out and build the capital of your kingdom. Your city will be called Hatthipura.”

To the second prince he said, “Dear boy, leave the city by the southern gate, and continue walking straight in that direction until you find a pure white royal horse. That will be your sign, and, on that site, you are to lay out and build the capital of your kingdom. Your city will be called Assapura.”

To the third prince he said, “Dear boy, leave the city by the western gate, and continue walking straight in that direction until you find a maned lion. That will be your sign, and, on that site, you are to lay out and build the capital of your kingdom. Your city will be called Sihapura.”

To the fourth prince he said, “Dear boy, leave the city by the northern gate, and continue walking straight in that direction until you find a wheel-frame made of jewels. That will be your sign, and, on that site, you are to lay out and build the capital of your kingdom. Your city will be called Uttarapancala.”

To the fifth prince he said, “Dear boy, build a great cetiya in this city, and go away toward the northwest. Continue walking straight in that direction until you find two mountains striking against each other and making the sound, ‘Daddara!’ That will be your sign, and, on that site, you are to lay out and build the capital of your kingdom. Your city will be called Daddarapura.”

The five princes left the city as the ascetic had instructed, discovered their signs, built their capitals, and ruled their respective kingdoms..

Having concluded his story, the Buddha identified the birth: “At that time, Devadatta was King Upacara, and I was the ascetic Kapila.”

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² With the tusks, trunk, and four legs touching the ground.