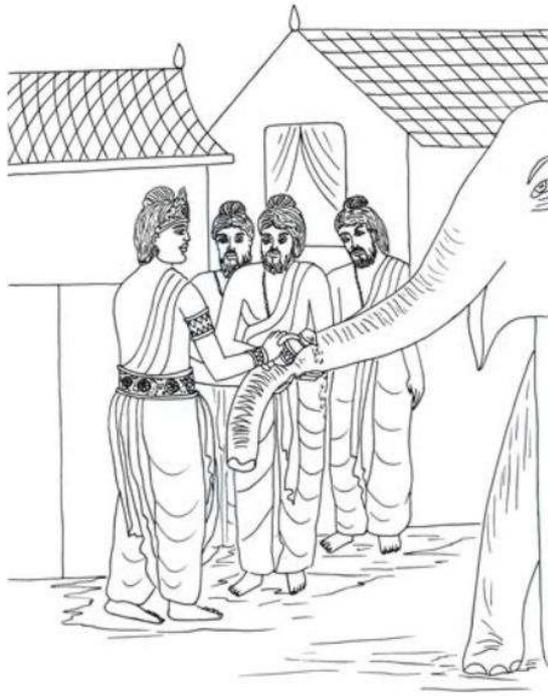


## Prince Vessantara Vessantara Jatska



*It was while staying at Nigrodha Monastery in Kapilavatthu that the Buddha told this story about an extraordinary shower of rain.*

*After spending a winter in Rajagaha, the Buddha proceeded to Kapilavatthu, capital city of his father's kingdom, attended by twenty thousand bhikkhus. The Sakyan princes were very eager to see the chief of their clan. They went to inspect the residence where he would be staying and declared, "This Banyan Grove is a delightful place, worthy of Sakka himself." Then they went with flowers to greet the Buddha, accompanied by all the young princes and princesses and many children.*

*The Sakyans were a notoriously proud people. The older princes thought to themselves, "Suddhodana's boy is younger than we are. He is merely our little cousin, our nephew, our grandson!" After the Buddha was seated in the*

*appointed place, surrounded by all the bhikkhus, they sent the younger princes to pay obeisance to him, while they, in their pride and stubbornness, sat toward the back without bowing.*

*The Buddha realized their intention and thought, "My relatives do not pay me proper respect as a Buddha, but I will make them do so." He concentrated his mind, rose into the air, and, as though shaking the dust from his feet on to their heads, caused fire and water alternately to stream from his body, which is called the Twin Miracle.*

*When King Suddhodana saw that wonder, he exclaimed to his son, "Soon after your birth, when I saw your feet placed on the head of the brahmin Asita, I bowed to you for the first time. On the day of the Plowing Festival, as you sat on the royal seat in the shade of a jambu tree whose shadow had not moved, I bowed to you for the second time. Now I see this glorious miracle, and I bow to you for the third time."*

*As soon as the Sakyan princes saw the king paying reverence, they were compelled to do likewise. Satisfied, the Buddha came down and sat again on the appointed seat. All who were there became calm with peace in their hearts. Suddenly, the skies opened and released a refreshing shower of rain. However, the rain fell on only those who wanted to get wet. Not a single drop fell on those who wished to remain dry.*

*"Look at this miracle!" everyone cried. "What power the Buddha has to make such a rain fall on his kinsmen!"*

*The Buddha said to them, "This is not the first time that such a great shower of rain has fallen upon my relatives because of me." At their request, he told this story of the past.*

Long, long ago, a king named Sivi reigned in his capital city of Jetuttara in the kingdom of Sivi. King Sivi had a son named Sanjaya. When Prince Sanjaya came of age, the king chose for

his bride the daughter of King Madda, Princess Phusati, who, by the time she was sixteen, had become the most beautiful woman in the world.

In her preceding life, Phusati had been born in Tavatimsa. When her time there was nearly over, because of innumerable merits she had accumulated in previous lives, Sakka granted her ten boons. After careful consideration, she chose: to live in Sivi's realm, to be chief queen, to have dark eyes and dark eyebrows, to be named Phusati, to have a son who loved giving, to keep her figure, to remain youthful so as to keep the king's affection, to have soft skin, not to become gray, and to be able to save those who had been condemned.

As soon as Sanjaya and Phusati were married, King Sivi abdicated and handed the kingdom over to his son. King Sanjaya loved his wife dearly.

Sakka remembered the boons he had granted Phusati and noted that one remained unfulfilled. "She asked for a good and generous son," he thought. "I will send him to her."

At that time, the Bodhisatta was in Tavatimsa, and his time there was ending. Sakka approached him and said, "Venerable Sir, you must be reborn in the realm of men. Now is the time for you to be conceived by Queen Phusati, consort of the king of Sivi." The Bodhisatta agreed and descended to earth. At the same time, sixty thousand other devas from that heaven were conceived by the wives of the king's courtiers.

As soon as Queen Phusati had conceived, she expressed the desire to have six almshalls built, one at each city gate, one in the city center, and one at her own door so that every day she could distribute six hundred thousand coins in alms.

When the king learned that his queen was expecting, he consulted his fortune tellers, who said, "Your Majesty, your wife is pregnant with one who will be so devoted to generosity that he will never be satisfied with giving." The king was pleased with their prediction, and he, too, made a practice of generosity. Because of the king's goodness, other rulers from all over Jambudipa sent him presents. There seemed to be no limit to the king's revenue.

After ten months, the queen informed the king that she wished to tour the capital. He ordered the city decorated, seated his queen in a royal chariot, and made a procession around the city. When they reached Vessa Street, the merchant quarters, the queen went into labor. The king had a lying-in chamber prepared, and she gave birth to a son right there.

The Bodhisatta was born free from impurity, with his eyes wide open. Immediately after he was born, he held out his hand to his mother and said, "Mother, I wish to make some gifts. Is there anything for me to give?"

She dropped a purse with one thousand coins into his outstretched hands and said, "Yes, my son. Give as you wish!"

Because he was born on Vessa Street, he was called Vessantara. On the same day, in the royal stables, a beautiful white elephant was born. This was regarded as an auspicious omen, and, because the elephant would be essential to the prince when he grew up, it was named Paccaya, which means "support."

The king appointed nurses for Vessantara and for the sixty thousand boys born at the same time. Vessantara grew up surrounded by these companions.

When the prince was four years old, the king ordered jewelers to make a precious necklace for him at a cost of one hundred thousand coins. He presented it to his son, but Vessantara immediately gave it to his nurses. They tried to return it to him, but he refused to take it back. When the nurses reported this, the king answered, "What my son has given is well given." He

then had another necklace made, but the prince gave that away too. This happened nine times in all.

When Vessantara was eight years old, he thought to himself, “Everything that I give comes from outside. This does not satisfy me. I wish to give something of my very own. If someone should ask for my heart, I would tear it out and give it. If someone asked me for my eyes, I would pluck them out and give them. If someone asked for my flesh, I would cut off every bit from my bones and give it.” As he pondered these thoughts in the depths of his heart, the great earth shook like a mad elephant. Mount Sineru, the highest of mountains, bowed like a sapling in the direction of the city of Jetuttara. Thunder rumbled, lightning flashed across the sky, and the seas churned as in a storm. Sakka clapped his hands, and Maha-Brahma signaled his approval. The entire universe was in an uproar.

By the age of sixteen, Vessantara had mastered all the arts and sciences. His parents chose his first cousin, Maddi, as his bride. On the appointed day, the young girl arrived from her father’s palace with a full retinue of attendants. The grand ceremony was both their wedding and the investiture of Vessantara as crown prince.

In time, Maddi gave birth to a son who was named Jali because he was first placed in a golden hammock. Later she had a baby girl, who was named Kanhajina because, right after birth, she was placed on a black skin.

From the time Vessantara became heir apparent, he gave away six hundred thousand coins every day. Six times each month, mounted upon his magnificent white elephant, Paccaya, the prince visited his six almshalls to supervise donations and to make offerings with his own hand.

It so happened that there was a severe drought in the kingdom of Kalinga. When the crops failed, there was a terrible famine. Many people were reduced to begging to escape outright starvation. In desperation, the people crowded into the king’s courtyard. They cried out for help and blamed him for their troubles. “What is it, my children?” the king asked. When the people told him about conditions in the kingdom, he promised that he would bring rain. For the next seven days the king strictly observed the precepts, but no rain fell.

On the eighth day, King Kalinga appeared before the people and announced, “My loyal subjects, although I have strictly kept the precepts for seven days, I have not been able to bring any rain. What more can I do?”

One citizen spoke up, saying, “Sire, if you yourself cannot bring rain, King Sanjaya’s son, Vessantara, in the city of Jetuttara, has a glorious white elephant, and, wherever that elephant goes, rain falls. We have heard reports that the prince is devoted to generosity. Send brahmins to ask for that elephant and to bring it back here to Kalinga.”

Accepting that suggestion, the king promptly selected eight brahmins, gave them provisions for the journey, and sent them to fetch Vessantara’s elephant.

When the eight brahmins reached Jetuttara, they were given hospitality in an almshall. On the full-moon day they went to the eastern gate to wait for a chance to ask for the elephant.

Early that morning, Vessantara bathed with perfumed water and ate breakfast. Mounting his noble, richly adorned elephant, he proceeded to the almshall at the eastern gate. From the knoll where they were standing, the brahmins could see the prince giving alms, but they had no chance to speak to him. They hurried to the southern gate.

When the prince reached the southern gate, the brahmins stretched out their hands and cried, “Victory to the noble Vessantara!”

“Brahmins, what is it that you desire?” Vessantara asked.

The brahmins replied, “We crave a precious thing, great prince. We ask for your marvelous elephant with tusks like poles.”

When Vessantara heard this, he thought, “Here am I, willing to give anything that is asked for, including my head, my flesh, and my heart, but all they want is a mere possession. Of course, I’ll give it to them.” In a loud voice he declared, “I give and never shrink from giving. This noble beast, this mighty tusked elephant, is given freely to these brahmins who have asked for it.” He climbed down from the elephant’s back and presented the magnificent animal to the brahmins. The noble elephant Paccaya was fully adorned with precious ornaments. The gold and jewels decorating his tusks alone were worth hundreds of thousands of coins, and the magnificent howdah on his back was beyond price. When the prince relinquished this incomparable elephant and its priceless accessories, along with the grooms and stablemen to attend the great beast, the earth shook.

The brahmins immediately climbed on the elephant’s back and rode down the main street of the city. When the crowd saw them, they shouted, “Hey, Brahmins, why are you mounted on our elephant? Where are you taking our elephant?”

The brahmins shouted back, “The great prince Vessantara has given the elephant to us. What’s it to you?” Then, with derogatory gestures to the crowd, they continued riding through the city and out the northern gate.

The people were outraged.

“When the great elephant was given away,” one man cried out, “I’m sure I felt an earthquake!”

“Yes,” shouted another, “and I heard a horrible noise!”

A raging mob rushed to the palace in protest. “The kingdom is ruined!” someone shouted to the king. “Why did Vessantara give away our elephant!” another asked. Others cried out, “How dare he make a present of our precious elephant!” “Let him be satisfied by giving food, clothing, jewelry, or horses to those rude brahmins.” “Why did the prince do this?” “Explain your son’s actions or we’ll deal with him ourselves!”

The people sounded so angry that the king was afraid they wanted to kill Vessantara. “Let me be king no more,” he shouted over the din. “I will not harm an innocent prince. No matter what you say, I could never kill him. He is my true-born son.”

A spokesman from the crowd shouted in reply, “Sire, we are not demanding that Prince Vessantara be killed or even that he be imprisoned. Still, when he gave away our elephant he went too far! He must be banished from the kingdom. Send him into exile on Mount Vamka !”

Unable to appease the crowd in any other way, the beleaguered king capitulated to the people’s will, but he asked that his son be allowed one happy night before he had to leave the capital. The people accepted that condition, and the king sent a message to his son, informing him of the people’s anger and of his banishment. Unaware of any offense he might have committed, Vessantara asked the messenger why the people were so angry. The messenger told him that the people of Sivi were outraged at his gift-giving and were demanding that he be banished to Mount Vamka, the traditional place of exile.

“My good man,” the prince replied, “since I would willingly give away my own eyes and my own heart, there should be no question of my giving mere gold and treasure. If anyone asked me, I would give away my own right hand without hesitation. My delight is in gifts! Even if the people banish me or kill me, I will never stop giving! I have committed no crime, but I will leave

the city by the criminals' gate. Even though I am being banished for the gift of the white elephant, I am not through with giving. Please ask the citizens to grant me a reprieve of an additional day. Before I go, I want to make one more offering. Tomorrow I would like to give the great Gift of the Seven Hundreds, and the following day I will leave."

The messenger returned and reported everything to the people. As soon as the man had left, Vessantara summoned his servants and ordered them to arrange everything so that he could give away seven hundred of each of the following: elephants, horses, chariots, cows, male servants, and female servants. Leaving all the preparations to them, he went to see Maddi.

He sat on a couch and spoke gently to his wife, "You must find a safe place for the wealth and presents that I have given you in the past and for your father's dowry, too. Hide all this treasure well."

"Where should I find a place to hide these things, my husband?"

"Give your wealth in gifts to those who are deserving. I know of no better or safer place than that, my dear."

"Of course, that is true, My Lord, but ..."

"Take good care of your children and your husband's parents," the prince continued. "Take good care of him who will be your new husband. If no one comes forward to marry you when I'm gone, seek a husband for yourself. Don't languish all alone."

"My Lord," Maddi cried, not understanding at all, "why are you saying these things that make no sense to me?"

Vessantara answered, "Lady, the people of Sivi are angry with me for the gift of the white elephant. They are banishing me from the kingdom. Tomorrow I will give the Gift of the Seven Hundreds, and the next day I will leave. I will go to the dark and dangerous forest, full of fierce beasts of prey. Who can predict whether or not I will be able to survive there? Nevertheless, the day after tomorrow, I must go."

Understanding at last Vessantara's meaning, Maddi cried with all earnestness: "No, My Lord, I will not let you go alone! Wherever you go, I will go. Given the choice to die with you or to live apart from you, death will be my choice. I'll follow wherever you lead. The children and I will stay with you. I promise that you will never find me a burden. When you see your darling children playing and hear them prattling in our new forest home, you will forget that you were born to be king. When you hear the trumpeting of the elephants, the crying of the screech owls, and the roaring of the rivers, you will forget that you were born to be king."

Neither Vessantara nor Maddi knew that Queen Phusati was overhearing their conversation. Distraught at the news of the banishment, she had gone to visit her son, but, finding him alone with Maddi, she hesitated to interrupt. "Better I should drink poison or leap off a cliff and die," she moaned to herself. "Why are they banishing my unoffending son, Vessantara, who is so respected, so free from greed, so generous to all who ask, so beloved by family, by friends, and by everyone in the kingdom! Why banish my innocent son, Vessantara?"

The queen hurried to the king and pleaded, "Please, Sire! Do not banish Vessantara just because some people are shouting! If this blameless boy is banished," she warned the king, "your kingdom will fall like an overripe mango. You will be like the crippled wild goose when the pond is dry—deserted by your courtiers and living alone."

"My dear," the king replied, "by sending your son into exile, I fulfill my royal duty, which is dearer than life itself."

“My son! My son!” the queen cried in despair. “Once hosts of men escorted him with banners as he rode in a chariot, but soon he’ll trudge unattended on foot. And Maddi she is used to being carried in a palanquin. How can she, with her delicate hands and feet, go into the rough forest?”

“I am like an eagle that finds its nest empty, its young chicks all slain. I cannot bear the emptiness they will leave behind. How I shall endure the pain of never seeing my son again? If my innocent son is banished, my life will be over!”

Alerted by the devas, people from all over Jambudipa flooded into Jetuttara and, as dawn was breaking, Vessantara began giving his gifts. In addition to the Gifts of the Seven Hundreds, he gave freely of every other imaginable thing; everyone received what he desired. He gave food to the hungry and even strong drink to those who required it. He was still distributing his gifts when evening fell. Banishing Vessantara from the kingdom was like cutting down a veritable wishing tree!

Having finished his great donation, the prince returned to his apartments to prepare for his departure. Then he and Maddi went to bid farewell to his parents.

Bowing to his father, he announced, “I go now to Mount Vamka. Having wronged my people by giving bounty from my hand, I accept this sentence of exile. I will atone for my mistake, but I will continue to do good.”

Turning to the queen, he said, “Mother, I take leave of you as an outcast.”

“I give you permission to go,” Queen Phusati replied, “and I give you my blessing, but, please, I beg you to leave Maddi and the children behind. She is unsuited for the forest. Why should she go with you?”

The prince replied, “I wouldn’t even take a slave away against his will. If Maddi wishes, let her come. If not, let her stay.”

“Princess,” the king urged his daughter-in-law, “please stay with us. Rough bark cloth does not suit you. You are suited for fine Baranasi silk. Your nature is very delicate. Forest life is too hard for you.”

“Without Vessantara,” Maddi answered calmly, “I have no desire to go on living.”

The king persisted by explaining the hardships of forest life, with all its biting and stinging insects, frightening noises, deadly snakes, and fierce beasts. Maddi listened and replied, “I willingly accept all the terrible things you describe. I am resolved to go. I will forge my way through the thickest forest without complaining. Any wife who loves her husband must do her duty. The wife who shares her husband’s lot, whether it is rich or poor, is praised even by the devas. Your Majesty, I will go into exile with your son. He is my joy and my very life.”

“Go if you will,” the king relented, “but leave your two little ones behind. What can they do in the forest? Let us keep them here with us where they will be well cared for.”

“My Jali and Kanhajina are dearest to my heart,” Maddi answered. “They will live with us in the forest and ease the pain of exile.”

“These children have always eaten the finest rice and meat,” the king insisted. “How can they survive if they are forced to eat wild fruit and berries? They have lived in beautifully painted rooms, safely guarded at night. How can they sleep at the roots of trees, on a bed of grass, bothered by mosquitoes and flies? It will be more than they can bear.”

Even as they talked, dawn came. An elaborate carriage with a team of four Sindh horses was brought. Maddi paid her respects to her husband’s parents and entered the carriage with her two children. “Do not worry,” she said to the king. “Wherever we go, we will care for the children.”

Vessantara also bowed to his parents and climbed into the carriage. As they drove in the direction of Mount Vamka, he shouted, "A blessing on my relatives. Farewell!"

"If my son desires to give," the queen announced as they drove away, "let him give." She sent two carts with him, each loaded with all sorts of precious things, but, in a short time, he had distributed everything to beggars he met on the road. Before they left the city, he had given away even all the jewelry he was wearing. Vessantara turned around to take one last look at his ancestral home in all its loveliness and ordered the people who had followed them to turn around and to return to the city. Then the carriage continued on its journey.

As soon as the prince had left the city, four brahmins arrived, asking about the Gift of the Seven Hundreds. When they were told that the ceremony was over and that the prince had left, they asked if he had taken anything with him. Learning that he had a coach and horses, they rushed after him.

Vessantara had asked Maddi to watch for other beggars, and, when she saw the four, she said, "Mendicants, My Lord." The prince immediately stopped the carriage. When the brahmins asked for the horses, he gave one horse to each.

Instantly, four devas, disguised as red deer, appeared and yoked themselves to the carriage. Vessantara, realizing who they were, smiled and said, "Look, Maddi! It's a miracle!" Before they had gone very far, a fifth brahmin approached and asked Vessantara for his carriage, which he gave willingly.

"Maddi," Vessantara instructed, "you take Kanhajina for she is light. Jali is a heavy boy, so I'll carry him myself." With the two children on their hips, they proceeded on foot, talking together happily and asking the way of people they met. Other travelers, touched by the sight of the little family, told them that Mount Vamka was a long way off and that they still had a hard task ahead.

The children became hungry and cried when they saw all the different kinds of fruit on the tall trees beside the road. Because of Vessantara's virtue, the trees bowed down so that the parents could reach the ripe fruit. Maddi marveled at this wondrous event.

Out of pity for the children, the devas shortened the way. That evening, the family arrived in the kingdom of Ceta, which was ruled by one of Vessantara's uncles. The prince chose to rest in a hall outside the city gate, without entering the city itself. Maddi brushed the dust off his feet and rubbed them. Then she went toward the gate, intending to announce her husband's arrival. Some local women recognized her and wondered why this princess, who should have been riding in a palanquin, appeared on foot. Realizing that Vessantara, Maddi, and the children had all come in this unbecoming manner, they hurried to inform the king.

As soon as the princes of Ceta heard of the royal family's peculiar arrival, they went to meet Vessantara. "What has happened to your kingdom, mighty prince?" they asked. "Where is your army? Where is your royal carriage? Why are you without a chariot or even a horse? You've come a long way. Were you defeated by an enemy? Is that why you are here without an entourage?"

"Thank you, sirs," Vessantara answered. "My father is well, but misfortune has befallen me. The other day, some brahmins came and asked for my great elephant because their kingdom was having a drought, so I gave them the elephant and all his trappings. This made the people of Sivi so angry that they called for my banishment, and my father was forced to accept their demands. Now I am on my way to Mount Vamka. Though I am only an exile, please show me a place to stay in the meantime."

The royal cousins welcomed Vessantara warmly, gave him many presents, and prepared a delicious feast for the family. They even offered Vessantara their own kingdom, and asked him to stay.

Vessantara accepted their gifts but insisted that he had to continue on to Mount Vamka to live in exile. “You must not even inform my father that I was here,” he told the princes. “I must go away a banished man. If the people of Sivi knew that you had asked me to become your king, they would be furious. I would hate to start a quarrel.”

Vessantara refused even to enter the city, so the princes furnished and decorated the hall where he was going to sleep and made it comfortable. Vessantara, Maddi, and the children stayed two nights in Ceta. When they left early the next morning, the princes accompanied them for fifteen yojanas.

“You must continue for another fifteen yojanas,” they told Vessantara. “That rocky mountain in the distance is Mount Gandhamadana. You, your wife, and your children may safely pass that way. From there, go straight northward, and you will see Mount Vepulla, a pleasant place with many shady trees. When you get there, you will find the Ketumati River, whose fresh, sweet water is full of fish. Bathe and rest there, and let the children play. After that, you will see Mount Nalika, which is full of songbirds and kinnaras. Continuing north, you will find Lake Mucalinda with blue and white water lilies. A little further along, you will come to a thick forest with lots of fruit trees and flowers. Follow the mountain cataracts to their spring, and you will see a lotus-covered lake. Build yourself a hut a little to the north. There is plenty of food nearby. It should be a safe haven for you.” Not satisfied with just giving directions, however, before returning to their capital, the princes assigned a trustworthy forester from that region to watch over Vessantara and his family.

When the family reached the Ketumati River, they took the princes’ advice and stopped to bathe and to rest. The forester prepared a delicious lunch for them and Vessantara gave him a golden hairpin. As they crossed the river, Vessantara’s mind became very calm. The family rested under a banyan tree and ate some of its fruit. Then they proceeded to Mount Nalika and to Lake Mucalinda. They walked along the northeast shore of the lake and entered the thick forest by a narrow footpath.

Sakka looked down and saw that Vessantara had entered the Himavat. He immediately called Vissakamma, chief architect among the devas, and ordered him to build a suitable place for Vessantara to stay. Vissakamma built two lovely hermitages, with sleeping rooms and day rooms, connected with covered walks, lined by banana plants and flowering shrubs. Then he drove away all unfriendly devas and all harsh-voiced animals and birds. At the entrance to the settlement he posted a sign saying, “All of this is for anyone who wishes to become an ascetic.”

When Vessantara saw the path, he felt sure it would lead to a settlement of ascetics. As soon as he saw the empty hermitage and the sign, he knew that Sakka had provided it for him. Accepting the gift of the hermitage, Vessantara took off his royal robe and put on the rough garb of an ascetic. When Maddi saw him dressed like that, she could not keep herself from crying, but, following his example, she also changed her clothes and the children’s. At that moment, because of Vessantara’s compassion, all beings within a radius of three yojanas, even the fiercest carnivores, stopped their violence and began treating each other gently. None even thought of hunting or hurting another.

Maddi suggested that Vessantara stay with the children during the day so that she could gather food, and he agreed. Vessantara told his wife that he also had a request. He asked her to stay apart from him so that they might maintain the modesty appropriate to their new ascetic life.

Every morning, Maddi arranged drinking water, food, and toothsticks. After sweeping out the hermitage, she left the children with their father and went to the forest with a basket, a pruning hook, and a trowel to find fruit, roots, berries, and flowers. She returned in the evening and bathed the children. Then the four of them sat at the door of the hermitage to eat their meal. At night, Maddi took the children to her own cell to sleep. For seven months, they lived peacefully in this way deep in the mountains.

At that time, in the kingdom of Kalinga, in the village of Dunnivittha, there was a brahmin by the name of Jujaka. In the past, Jujaka had collected one hundred coins in donations. He had left this fortune in the safekeeping of a family in the village and had gone off in search of more. He stayed away such a long time, however, that the family assumed that he would never come back, and they spent the money. When Jujaka finally returned, he was furious to discover that his savings were gone. Too poor to replace the money, the couple gave Jujaka their daughter, Amittatapana, instead.

Amittatapana took very good care of Jujaka. In fact, some young men said to their wives, “Look at Amittatapana. See how well she cares for that old man while you are careless of your young husband!” Naturally, this infuriated the other women, and they decided to drive Amittatapana out of the village.

At every opportunity, the women mocked her and made her life miserable. When they went to the river with their pots to get water, they teased her: “How your parents must have hated you to give you to an ugly, decrepit old man like that! How can you bear to look at that hideous old man? You are a young girl! How could that old dotard give you any happiness? Why don’t you go back where you came from?”

This abuse upset Amittatapana very much, and she usually returned home in tears.

One day, Jujaka saw her crying and asked, “What is wrong, my dear?”

“I can’t fetch water anymore. Whenever I go out, the other women make fun of me.”

“Don’t worry. You don’t have to carry water. From now on I’ll fetch it myself.”

“That is impossible. That would just make things worse! If you did that, I would be ashamed to stay with you. You must get a slave to do the work.”

“My dear, how can I get a slave? I have no money. Don’t be angry; I’ll do your work myself.”

“Now, listen to me! I’ve heard that Prince Vessantara is staying on Mount Vamka. People say he is devoted to giving. Go and ask him for a slave. He will certainly give you what you want.”

“I’m an old man, and Mount Vamka is far away. The road there is rough. Please don’t be unreasonable; I’ll do the work myself.”

“So! You’re going to give up without even trying! I’ll say it once more: if you don’t get a slave to do the work for me, I’ll leave you. You’ll soon see me in someone else’s arms,” she taunted him, “and then you’ll be sorry! You’ll miss me so much, your gray hairs will multiply, and you will be miserable and lonely in your old age.”

Terrified that his young wife would carry out her threat and leave him, Jujaka gave in. “All right! All right!” he cried, “I’ll go and return with a pair of slaves who will wait on you hand and foot.”

While his wife prepared the provisions for his journey, Jujaka laid in a supply of wood and water so that she would be safe and comfortable until he returned. “Don’t go out after dark,” he warned her. “Be careful until I return. I promise not to be gone long.” Then, with tears in his eyes, he set out.

As soon as he reached the capital city of Sivi, he asked where he could find Prince Vessantara. He was shocked that his question provoked such anger. Everyone he asked shouted at him and pushed him away. “It’s people like you,” they said, “who ruined our prince. Because of giving to you beggars, he has been banished from the kingdom. It’s your fault that he had to leave with his wife and children to live on Mount Vamka.” Some people were so angry that they threw sticks and stones at Jujaka to chase him away.

The devas, however, guided the brahmin and set him on the right road to Mount Vamka. He soon reached the forest, but then he got hopelessly lost and whined loudly, “Does anyone know where Vessantara, the great and generous prince, is staying? Won’t someone tell me how to find Prince Vessantara?”

When the forester who had been assigned to look after Vessantara heard Jujaka, he thought, “This man is up to no good. I’ll bet he wants to ask for Maddi or the children. I cannot let that happen. I will kill him!”

The forester drew his bow and approached Jujaka. “Because of men like you,” he shouted at the brahmin, “Prince Vessantara has been exiled. You worthless fool! Rather than let you harm his wife and children, I’ll kill you myself!”

Shaking with fear, Jujaka quickly devised a bold lie. “My friend,” he said as sweetly as he could, “you cannot kill a messenger. That’s an ancient rule! I am an ambassador from the king of Sivi. The people have come to repent their hasty anger with Prince Vessantara. The king misses his son, and the queen is pining away. I have come to escort Vessantara back to the capital. If you know where I can find him, it is your duty to help me.”

The forester was delighted to hear this wonderful news. He quickly put down his bow, called off his hunting dogs, and invited Jujaka to a feast of roast leg of deer and a pot of honey. Completely taken in by Jujaka’s deceit, the forester described Vessantara’s peaceful hermitage and gave detailed directions to get there.

Jujaka was so pleased that he offered the forester a piece of his homemade barley bread, but the forester refused, insisting that he was fully provisioned. To make sure Jujaka would not make a mistake, the forester explained the path once more.

Further along, Jujaka came upon an ascetic by the name of Accuta. “Holy man,” the brahmin greeted the ascetic, “I trust that you are prosperous and well, with plenty of roots and fruit, that you are not bothered by flies or gnats or creeping things, and that wild beasts leave you alone.”

“Thank you, Brahmin,” the ascetic replied. “Yes, I am quite well, and there is plenty of fruit here. I am not troubled by insects or animals. As a matter of fact, in all the years I’ve lived here, I have never been bothered by any sickness whatsoever. Please wash up, and rest from your journey. Have some tender leaves and ripe fruit. This water is from a cave up the hill. It is very cool and refreshing.”

Jujaka wasted no time in explaining his errand. “I am looking for Vessantara, King Sanjaya’s son, who was banished by the people of Sivi. If you know where he is, please tell me.”

“I’m afraid your intentions are not good,” the ascetic replied suspiciously. “No doubt, you have come to ask for his wife or to take his children as your servants. The prince has no wealth or property here.”

Jujaka quickly protested. “No, no, you misunderstand me! I have only the best of intentions. It is a joy to be able to visit a good man. I have never met this prince before. I have just come here to see him; that’s all. If you know where he is, please tell me.”

“All right then,” Accuta answered, also taken in by the brahmin’s honeyed words. “Stay with me tonight, and tomorrow I’ll tell you how to get there.”

The next morning, the ascetic pointed out the route to Vessantara’s hermitage, and Jujaka set out. By evening, he had reached the lake. He thought to himself, “Vessantara’s wife will be returning from the forest. Women are always in the way, so, tomorrow, after she has gone out to gather fruit, I will approach Vessantara and ask him for the children. I’ll get them and be on my way before she comes back.” Satisfied with his plan, he climbed a small hill and lay down to sleep in a pleasant spot.

Just before dawn, Maddi dreamed that a black man, wearing yellow robes and with red flowers in his ears, came into the leaf hut. He grabbed her by the hair, dragged her out, and threw her down. As she lay shrieking on the ground, he gouged out her eyes, lopped off her arms, cut open her breast, and tore out her heart, which he carried off, dripping with blood. She awoke in terror. “What an unspeakably evil dream!” she cried. “I must ask Vessantara to tell me what it means. Surely he will understand it.”

Although it was still dark, she hurried to Vessantara’s hut and knocked at the door. “Who is it?” Vessantara asked.

“It is I, My Lord,” Maddi answered.

“Why have you come at this hour?” Vessantara asked, without opening the door. “Are you not breaking our agreement?”

“I am very sorry, but I am not coming out of desire. I have had an evil dream, and only you can explain it.”

“I see,” Vessantara replied, opening the door. “Please tell me what you saw.”

As soon as Maddi had explained the nightmare, Vessantara understood its meaning. “My generosity will soon be perfected,” he thought. “Today someone will come and ask for the children. I must comfort Maddi and let her go back to bed.”

Aloud he said, “Your mind must have been disturbed by indigestion. Don’t worry.”

Reassured by his words, Maddi returned to her own hut, but the dream continued to haunt her so much that she could not get back to sleep. When it finally became light, she emerged and prepared things as she did every day. As she hugged and kissed the children, she told them that she had had a bad dream and warned them to be careful. She asked Vessantara to look after the children with extra care. Then, wiping away her tears, she picked up her basket and tools and went to the forest to gather food.

Jujaka waited until he was sure that Maddi would be out of the way. In joyful anticipation, Vessantara had come out of his hut and was sitting on a stone slab. “Now the supplicant will come!” he thought. As the children played at his feet, he eagerly watched the road. As soon as Vessantara saw the brahmin approaching the hermitage, he sensed that his seven idle months were at an end. He once again took up the burden of generosity and called out happily, “Welcome, Brahmin! Come here!”

“Jali,” he called to his son, “stand up! Here comes a brahmin! Isn’t it wonderful? It’s just like old times!”

“Yes, Father,” the boy answered. “I see him too. It looks like he wants to ask a favor. Let’s welcome him.” Jali quickly ran to meet the brahmin and offered to carry his bag.

“This must be Jali, the prince’s son,” Jujaka thought. “I must start out by treating him roughly.” He snapped his fingers at the lad and snarled under his breath, “Get back! Get away!”

“What a harsh man this is!” thought the boy.

To Vessantara, however, Jujaka was extremely polite. He greeted him warmly, inquired after his health, and asked about the family’s welfare.

“We are all faring quite well, thank you,” Vessantara replied. “We have plenty of food and good water, the surroundings are comfortable, and no wild animals annoy us. Please have some of our fruit, and drink some of the delicious cold water from a cave on the hill.”

As soon as Jujaka was seated comfortably, Vessantara addressed him directly, “Tell me, good sir, why you have come to this deep forest. What business do you have here?”

“You are like a great flood which never fails,” Jujaka replied, praising Vessantara’s virtues. Then just as directly as the question had been posed, he answered, “I have come to ask for your children. Please give them to me.”

Vessantara was delighted. “I give them to you without hesitation,” he announced. “You will be their master. But, sir, my wife went a little while ago to collect food. She’ll be back this evening. Please stay here tonight. My wife will wash the children and garland them with flowers. Tomorrow morning, we will send you on your way with them.”

“No, great prince,” Jujaka answered, “I must go. I do not want to stay. I’ll leave right away to make sure that nothing happens to delay me. Women are not generous givers. Give me your children now. There is no need for them to see their mother’s face. No need at all!”

“If you don’t want to meet my wife and a faithful wife she is, indeed,” Vessantara said, “take Jali and Kanhajina to their grandfather. As soon as my father sees them, he will give you a fortune.”

“Oh no, my friend,” Jujaka answered quickly. “I’m sure your father, the king, would punish me, perhaps even kill me. I want the children to serve my wife, and I’ll take them away right now.”

When the children heard this, they ran to hide in the bushes behind the hut, but they were so frightened that they couldn’t keep still. They scampered here and there, looking for a safer place. Finally, in desperation, they jumped into the lake and hid among the lotus leaves.

Jujaka looked for the children but could not find them.

“Vessantara!” he cried. “You’re nothing but a liar and a fraud! You said that you would give me the children, but as soon as I told you that, instead of taking them to the capital, I was going to take them home and make them my wife’s servants, you signaled to them to hide. And now you just sit there, looking so innocent!”

“Don’t worry,” Vessantara said calmly to Jujaka. “They have probably just run away. I’ll get them.” Seeing their footprints behind the hut, he started walking toward the lake, calling, “Jali, my beloved son! Please come and fulfill my perfection now by following my will. You will be the ship to carry me across the sea of existence beyond the realms of devas and men. Through you, I will be free.”

When the boy heard his father, he pushed aside the lotus leaves and came out. “Let that old brahmin do what he wants with me,” he sobbed as he embraced his father’s feet. “I will never disobey my father.”

“My boy, where is your sister?” Vessantara asked.

“Father,” Jali answered, “in times of danger, all creatures take care of themselves.”

Realizing that the children had made a pact, Vessantara called again, “Kanha, my beloved daughter! Please come and fulfill my perfection now by following my will. You will be the ship to carry me across the sea of existence beyond the realms of devas and men. Through you, I will be free.”

“I will not quarrel with my father,” Kanhajina resolved as she too emerged from the water. Falling beside her brother at her father’s feet, she grasped Vessantara’s left ankle and wept. As Vessantara stood looking down at his two young children, his own tears fell upon their backs. “My dear, dear children,” he said, lifting them up and comforting them, “don’t you know that I have gladly given you away so that my desire may attain fulfillment? Now you must go with this brahmin.

“Jali, my son, if you wish to become free, you must pay him one thousand coins, but your sister is very beautiful. Should a person of low birth give the brahmin money to free her, it would break her noble birthright. No one but a king can pay the price of the one hundreds. Therefore, for your sister to be free, the brahmin must be paid one hundred elephants, one hundred horses, one hundred bulls, one hundred coins, one hundred male servants, and one hundred female servants.”

Then he led the children back to the hermitage and called the brahmin. Vessantara took his water pot and poured water, signifying that his gift was freely given. “Dearer than my son one-hundredfold, one-thousandfold, one-hundred-thousandfold,” he declared, “is omniscience!”

As he handed the brahmin the precious gift of his beloved children, his mind was filled with joy, and the earth trembled at the greatness of his gift.

Impatient to be off, Jujaka tied the boy’s right hand to the girl’s left hand with a vine and dragged them away. As the children staggered forward, he beat them until they bled. When they came to a very rough place in the road, the old man stumbled and fell. Instantly the children slipped off their bonds and ran back to Vessantara.

“Father! Father!” they cried, “please let us wait until Mother returns! Don’t send us away before she comes back. Let the brahmin sell us or kill us, but please let us see our mother again. His hands are rough; his nails are torn; he’s covered with spots and wrinkles; and he has squinty eyes. He’s cruel and inhuman; maybe he’s even a cannibal.”

“Father!” Jali cried. “I appeal to you on behalf of my dear sister. Let her stay! She has never known such harshness before.”

When Vessantara did not answer, Jali continued, lamenting, “I’m not afraid of death; I know that we all must die. What I regret is that I will never see my mother’s face again. Never again will I see my beloved father. I know how much they, too, will grieve. How they will weep after my sister and I have gone! Now we must leave our playground and our toys. No more will we wear these lovely flowers, nor eat this delicious fruit. Farewell to all the animals that we have loved in this forest home!”

Jujaka roughly retrieved the children, tied their wrists together again, and drove them away even more roughly.

“Father!” Jali cried. “Give Mother all our toys. They will ease her grief.”

Seeing the children treated like this and hearing their plaintive cries, Vessantara trembled violently. When he thought of never seeing his son and daughter again, he began to weep uncontrollably. “Who will feed my children when they are hungry?” he cried, as he entered the hut alone. “How could that brahmin strike my defenseless, innocent children in front of me? Has

he no shame? No man with any decency would treat even the lowliest slave like that! Though I can no longer see them, I know that he is scolding and whipping my darlings while I am here, helpless and unable to protect them.”

As he stood alone in the hut, his love for the children welled up in his mind. The vision of the brahmin beating them was more than he could bear. He felt an urge to follow Jujaka, to kill him, and to bring the children back. He even picked up his bow and started for the door.

“No!” he thought, restraining himself with great effort. “To give a gift and then to regret it would be a great sin. That is not the way of righteousness. Although the children are suffering, I cannot ask for them back. It’s wrong to rescind a gift once given. I must not even allow myself to feel any pain.”

Jujaka hurried the children along, beating them the whole while.

“Now I understand,” Jali cried, “what people mean when they say that a child who has no mother is fatherless, as well. Without mother and father, life is nothing to us. We might as well be dead, Kanha. We are nothing more than the chattel of this horrible, greedy man. Farewell, beautiful forest! Good-bye, lovely home! Oh, Kanha, everything is lost!”

Once again, the clumsy old brahmin fell and dropped the cord. As fast as they could, the children ran back to their father.

Jujaka became very angry. He got up quickly and followed them back to the hut. “You two are clever at running away, but I’ll fix that!” he shouted. He tied the cord even tighter than before and led them away a third time.

Kanhajina turned back and called, “Father, this man beats me as if I were a slave. Brahmins are said to be upright men. He cannot be a brahmin. He must be a yakkha, taking us away to eat us. How can you just stand there and watch us being dragged away to be a yakkha’s meal?”

This plaintive cry from his beloved daughter was like a flame burning Vessantara’s heart. Tears welled up in his eyes and rolled down his cheeks like drops of blood. Then he thought, “All this pain comes from affection and not from any other cause. I must quiet this affection and become calm.” By the power of this insight, he overcame his sorrow and was able to sit perfectly still.

“My feet are very sore and the road is very hard,” Kanhajina continued lamenting. “It’s already evening, but still this hateful brahmin drives us on. To devas that dwell in these hills and forests, we bow in greeting. Devas of this lake, keep our mother well. She’s been gone a long time. She must have gathered a lot of wild fruit and roots by now. When she sees our empty hut, she’ll cry! Perhaps she will follow us. If she does, I hope she hurries. If she had met this cruel man and given him fruit and honey, he never would have treated us so cruelly.”

When Vessantara gave his dearly beloved children to the brahmin, the earth resounded so loudly that the sound reached the Brahma heavens and touched the hearts of all the deities dwelling there. When those devas heard the sobs of the children being beaten by the brahmin, they thought, “When Maddi returns to the hermitage, she will ask Vessantara about the children. As soon as she learns that they have been given away, if it is still daylight, she will run after them. This would not be right.” They assigned three devas to assume the shapes of a lion, a tiger, and a leopard. They were told to keep Maddi from returning before sunset, to guard her from other wild animals, and to allow her to come back only by moonlight.

All day, Maddi had been thinking about the evil dream she had had. She wanted to gather food very quickly and to return early to the hermitage. She tried to hurry, but, as she became more

flustered and worried, her hand trembled, she dropped her trowel, and the basket slipped from her shoulder. She could no longer tell the barren trees from those laden with fruit. Her head began throbbing, and the whole world felt upside down. “Why do I feel so strange?” she asked herself. “What can be the meaning of this? Look!” She cried. “It’s time for dinner. My children are waiting for me. They are hungry and thirsty.” She turned to go, but she found the three wild animals standing in front of her. “What is this? The only path blocked! Oh, mighty beasts, mighty monarchs of the wood,” she pleaded, “please let me pass. I am royal, too! A banished prince’s wife. When you return home this evening, you can see your children. Let me return to my Jali and Kanhajina. My father is a king; my mother, a queen. Be brothers now in righteousness, and let me pass.”

Although she continued pleading, the three great beasts refused to move. They remained there, watching her until the moon was shining overhead. Then they got up and silently moved away, finally allowing Maddi to return to the hermitage.

By the time she reached the end of the covered walk, it was dark, except for the light of the full moon. When she reached the entrance to the hermitage, she cried out, “My children, all dusty from their play, like little fawns with their ears pricked up, always wait for me here. Today I cannot see Jali and Kanhajina. My head is spinning. My children must be dead! Why is the hermitage so quiet? Even the crows and songbirds are silent!”

Confused and frightened, she approached Vessantara and set down the basket of fruit. “Why are you so quiet?” she asked, trembling. “Where are the children? That nightmare comes back to me! Have my children been carried off by some beast of prey? Have they wandered off to play? Are they asleep?”

Vessantara said nothing.

“My husband, why don’t you speak to me? What have I done wrong? That I cannot find my children is pain enough, but, if you do not speak to me, I will die from grief!”

“Maddi, royal princess whose glory is great,” Vessantara said slowly, “you went for food early in the morning. Why are you so late?”

“Didn’t you hear the lion, the tiger, and the leopard roaring? I had so much trouble in the forest. I kept dropping my spade, and my basket kept slipping off my shoulder. My head was spinning, and the dream haunted me all day. I bowed to all four quarters, praying that no harm should come to my daughter or my son. Then, when I tried to come home, those three fierce animals blocked my path. That is why I am late.”

Vessantara did not answer.

“I have tended my husband and my children night and day,” Maddi cried, becoming more and more distracted. “I have brought wild fruit and roots from the forest. Here is a lily for our daughter, and here is one for Jali. Let’s give them these flowers and see them dance. Call them, Sivi, call them! Oh, mighty monarch, since we were banished, we have shared all our joy and sorrow. Please tell me now where my beloved Kanhajina and my Jali are. What have I done to offend the devas so that I cannot see my darlings?”

Vessantara remained perfectly still and silent.

Trembling, Maddi ran from the hut to look for the children. By the light of the full moon she could see the jambu trees, the great banyan, and all the other places where they played. She found some fruit half-eaten, flowers they had cast off, and toys they had been playing with, but there was no trace of the children. After searching all through the hermitage again, she returned to where Vessantara was sitting. He had not moved since she arrived.

“You haven’t split the kindling or lit the fire,” she said to him. “You haven’t even carried water. Why are you sitting here idly? When I return at the end of the day, I would like to rest, but, today, I cannot find Jali and Kanhajina!”

Vessantara neither moved nor spoke.

Maddi ran back to search again in every corner of the hermitage, fearing that she might have overlooked some hiding place.

“Husband!” she wept. “I cannot find my children, nor can I see how they have died!”

Still Vessantara said nothing.

Unable to accept the possibility that the children were not there, Maddi frantically searched a third time in all the same places.

“I have searched everywhere for them or for a sign of what has happened to them, but I can find nothing! Silence hangs over this hermitage like a great black cloud. I can endure no more!” she cried, as she stretched out her arms and fell in a swoon.

“Oh no! She’s dead!” thought Vessantara, becoming agitated. “This is not a fit place for Maddi to die. If she had died in Jetuttara, there would have been great splendor. Two entire kingdoms would have mourned. Here in the forest, I am alone. What should I do? What can I do?”

Recovering his presence of mind, he knelt beside her and felt her pulse. Her heart was still beating, and her body was still warm. Although they had lived as ascetics for seven months, Vessantara tenderly laid her head upon his lap, sprinkled her with water, and, with tears in his eyes, rubbed her face and her bosom, trying to revive her. After a few minutes, Maddi opened her eyes. As soon as she had regained her senses, she asked, “My husband, where have the children gone?”

“I have given them to a brahmin,” he answered softly.

“My dear, if you gave the children to a brahmin, why didn’t you tell me? Why did you let me weep and carry on?”

“I didn’t want to cause you pain,” Vessantara answered. “This morning, a poor old brahmin came begging for the children. I gave them to him.” Before Maddi had a chance to say anything, he continued, “Don’t worry, Maddi. Please don’t grieve too much. Look at me. Breathe again. We’ll get them back, and we’ll be happy again. When asked, good men should give whatever they can grain, cattle, wealth, and even sons. Maddi, rejoice with me! There is no greater gift than one’s children.”

“I do rejoice!” Maddi reassured him. “I know that there is no greater gift than one’s children. Set your mind at ease. My dear husband, in a world of selfish men, you give gifts with a lavish hand. Your generosity does you credit. I pray that you may always give like that!”

“Maddi,” he said, greatly relieved and overjoyed that she agreed with him, “if I had not been able to give away my children and, thus, to gain this sublime peace of mind, these great miracles would not have happened.” He told her that, when he gave the children to Jujaka, he had felt a great earthquake, the sky was filled with thunder and lightning, and a great cry arose from the devas.

“Yes,” Maddi cried, “I, too, felt the earthquake. I saw the lightning and heard the thunder. Of course, both the Brahmas in the highest heavens and the devas in Tavatimsa rejoiced. There is no greater gift than one’s children.”

From their arrival in the forest, Sakka had been watching over Vessantara and the hermitage. While Vessantara and Maddi were talking, Sakka thought, “Vessantara willingly gave his

children to Jujaka. It is very possible now that some vile creature will come and ask him for the incomparable and virtuous Maddi. It would not do for an undeserving beggar to take her away, leaving the prince alone, helpless and destitute. I must prevent that. I will prevent it, and in so doing, I will enable Vessantara to attain the supreme height of perfection!”

At dawn the next morning, another brahmin appeared at the hermitage and politely greeted Vessantara, inquiring as to his health and well-being.

“Thank you, Brahmin,” Vessantara replied. “I am prosperous and well. There are abundant roots and wild fruit here. There are neither annoying insects nor wild beasts of prey to trouble me. I’ve lived here seven months, and you are the second brahmin to visit. Welcome. Please make yourself at home. Wash your feet, and enjoy the simple hospitality I can offer. Taste this sweet fruit, and drink some of this cool water which comes from a cave hidden high on a hill.”

After they had spoken pleasantly for a few minutes, Vessantara asked the brahmin why he had come to the remote forest.

“Mighty prince,” the brahmin answered, “you are like a great flood which never fails. I am old, but I have come here to ask for your wife Maddi. Please give her to me.”

Vessantara thought, “Yesterday, I let another take both Jali and Kanhajina. Now it is Maddi, my dear devoted wife. I cannot say that I do not love my children or that I do not treasure my faithful wife, but dearer than these is wisdom. Above all, I love perfect knowledge.”

He answered the brahmin without hesitation, “I will not hide that I am weary, but gifts delight my heart. Good sir, of my own free will, and with an open hand, I offer you my wife.” As he poured water from a pitcher to consecrate the gift, the earth again shook and lightning flashed.

As Maddi listened to this conversation, she neither frowned nor showed surprise. Holding her head erect, she thought, “Vessantara knows best what he is doing.” When Vessantara looked at her to see her reaction, she said, as clearly as if a lion were roaring, “From childhood, I have been his wife, and he is my husband still. Prince Vessantara is free to give me to whomever he wishes.”

Delighted with her composure and her resolution, the brahmin praised Maddi for her fortitude. He affirmed that the earthquakes and the lightning had been the result of Vessantara’s mighty gifts and of his overcoming obstacles, both human and divine. “It is hard to do as good men do,” he proclaimed, “and to give as they can give. Virtuous and generous men like you go to heaven, while the evil and stingy fall into hell.”

“Now, good prince,” he continued, “I give Maddi, your good and lovely wife, back to you. The two of you are perfectly matched to live together harmoniously. Since both of you are of one mind in all things, it is fitting that you stay on here in this forest hermitage and continue doing good.”

Then, rising into the air like the morning sun, the brahmin identified himself. “I am Sakka!” he declared. “I have come to test you, and I am satisfied. Eight boons I grant to you. Choose what you will.”

“First,” Vessantara began, “I wish to be reconciled with my father. Let him call me back and set me on the throne.

“My second wish is that I may never condemn any man to death, even the guiltiest. Instead, let me be able to release from death those who have been condemned.

“May all people young, middle-aged, and elderly feel free to look to me for help. This is my third wish.

“Fourth, may I always be contented with my own wife, never straying, never unfaithful.

“My fifth wish, Sakka, is that you grant long life to my beloved son, that he may conquer the world with righteousness.

“Every morning may I receive celestial food. This is my sixth wish.

“My seventh wish is that the means of giving may never fail me and that I may always give wholeheartedly and gladly.

“Finally, may I, at the end of my life, be reborn straightway in heaven.”

“These eight boons I grant,” Sakka declared. “Very soon, your beloved father will long to see you and will send for you.” Then the king of the gods disappeared and returned to his heaven. Confident after having received Sakka’s blessing, Maddi and Vessantara resumed their ascetic life.

Meanwhile, Jujaka and the children were trudging through the forest. Every night, Jujaka tied the children with vines and left them lying on the ground. He himself was so terrified of wild beasts that he climbed a tree to sleep safely in the branches. Devas, however, were constantly watching over the children. As soon as Jujaka was gone, they appeared, disguised as the children’s parents, and released the bonds. The devas gently massaged the children’s hands and feet, washed and fed them, and placed them on a heavenly couch. At dawn, when Jujaka came down from his tree, he would find the children just as he had left them. He never knew that anything had happened. In this way, the children journeyed onward unharmed.

The devas were also guiding Jujaka. He thought he was headed for his home in Kalinga, but, after fifteen days of walking, he had walked sixty yojanas and arrived, instead, in Jetuttara.

The night before they arrived, King Sanjaya had a dream. He dreamed he was sitting on his throne when a man came and handed him two beautiful flowers. He hung the blossoms over his ears, and pollen fell from them, covering his chest. When he awoke, he asked his advisors what the dream meant. “Some noble warriors, Sire, who have been absent for a long time, will return to your kingdom.”

After breakfast, the king went to the audience hall, sat on his throne, and waited. The devas guided Jujaka to the courtyard of the palace. As soon as the king saw the children, he asked, “Whose faces are those, shining like gold? Who can those children be? The boy looks like Jali, and the girl very much resembles Kanhajina! They are as beautiful and as golden as two little lion cubs.” Excitedly, he sent a courtier to bring them to him.

“Good sir,” he said to the brahmin, “tell me where you have brought these children from?”

Jujaka replied, “Two weeks ago they were given to me by one who was quite pleased with his gift.”

“By what sort of speech did you manage to get them?” the king asked. “From whom did you receive these children, greatest of all gifts?”

Jujaka replied, “From Prince Vessantara, who, like the great earth, gives without discrimination. He gave me his own children as slaves.”

When they heard this, the courtiers heaped scorn upon Vessantara. “That is outrageous!” they cried. “We banished him for giving away his elephant, but now he goes beyond all decency and gives away his children! A man might well give servants, a horse, a mule, a cart, or even an elephant; but how could anyone give away his own children to become slaves? It certainly is good that we got rid of him; he is not fit to be king!”

“Grandfather!” Jali cried, when he heard his father thus wrongly criticized. “What they are saying is not fair! How could my father have given slaves, a horse, a mule, a cart, or an elephant? He has nothing at all!”

“Children, I praise your father’s gift,” the king quickly reassured them. “I have no words of blame for him. But, tell me, how did he feel? What was in his heart when he gave you to this brahmin?”

Jali replied, “His heart was burning, and it seemed that it would break. His eyes were red, and tears rolled down his cheeks.”

“Grandfather,” Kanhajina said, speaking out for the first time since they arrived, “this brahmin enjoys beating us with creepers as if we were slaves. He is not really a brahmin, but a yakkha pretending to be a man!”

“My dears,” the king said gently, “you used to climb up on my lap. Why are you standing over there so far away?”

Jali answered, “We may be children of a king and queen, but now we are this brahmin’s slaves, so we must stay where we are.”

King Sanjaya was greatly shaken by their answer. “My dearest children, don’t say that. You will break my heart. Come, let me buy you back, and you’ll be slaves no more! Tell me what price your father set when he gave you away.”

Jali replied, “My price was set at one thousand coins, but, to free my sister, you will have to pay the price of the one hundreds, that is, one hundred each of elephants, horses, bulls, coins, male servants, and female servants.”

The king immediately ordered his steward to pay Jujaka the one thousand coins for Jali as well as the full price of the one hundreds for Kanhajina. He also had them prepare a seven-story mansion in which Jujaka could keep all his newly-acquired treasure.

Thoroughly gratified by this unexpected outcome, the old brahmin retired to his new residence to enjoy his wealth. He reclined on a luxurious couch and let himself be served plate after plate of rice, with servings of succulent meat and spicy curries. He indulged his appetite without restraint.

Servants took the children, bathed them, and provided them with fine clothes. After Jali and Kanhajina had been properly fed, they returned to their grandparents. The king took one in his lap, and the queen held the other.

“My dear boy,” the king said to Jali, “tell me how your parents are doing. We trust they are both well. Do they have enough to eat? Are they bothered by insects and wild beasts in the forest?”

“Thank you, Sire, for your concern,” Jali answered. “Our parents are both well. They are not troubled by insects, nor do wild beasts disturb them. Every day, Mother finds plenty of herbs, nuts, and fruit for us, but she has grown very thin. The exposure to the sun, the heat, and the wind has aged her and darkened her skin. Every night, she sleeps on animal skins spread on the ground.”

He paused for just a moment, but, before his grandfather could ask more questions, he continued, “It is customary in the world for a man to love his son, but it seems that you have failed at this. You have not loved my father adequately.”

“Yes, my boy. You are right,” the king admitted reflectively. “It was wrong of me to drive your father away. I knew that he was innocent. I should not have listened to the people’s angry

cries. Seeing the error of my decision, I am now ready to bestow upon him my title, all my wealth, and all my power. Let Vessantara, your noble father, come and rule the kingdom of Sivi.”

“But, Grandfather,” Jali quickly replied, “he will not return at my word. You yourself must go and personally give him your blessing.”

“Again you are right, dear boy!” Turning to his commander-in-chief, King Sanjaya ordered, “Prepare my elephants, my horses, and my chariots! Mobilize the entire army! Prepare armor, shields, and banners! Summon all my brahmins and advisors! Invite all my loyal subjects! Let us proceed to Mount Vamka to find Prince Vessantara and to invite him back to the capital!”

The king commanded that the road from Jetuttara all the way to Mount Vamka be leveled and widened to accommodate the procession. He instructed the people to decorate the roadside and to prepare music, entertainment, and refreshments along the entire length of the thoroughfare by which his son would return.

Caught up in the festive atmosphere of these preparations, Jujaka ate so much rich food that his stomach burst, and he died. Although his death was proclaimed throughout the city, no relative could be found, so all his newly acquired property reverted to the king, who arranged a funeral for the brahmin.

In seven days, everything was ready. The king seated himself upon Paccaya, the great white elephant, which had been returned by the grateful king of Kalinga after rains ended their kingdom’s drought. The elephant trumpeted loudly with joy at the prospect of being reunited with his master, Vessantara, once more, and the grand procession set out from Jetuttara with Jali as a guide. The chariot wheels and the horses created a thundering din as the army marched in a cloud of dust toward Mount Vamka. They entered the forest and continued marching for one more day and one more night. On the shore of Lake Mucalinda, Prince Jali suggested that a camp be built.

From the hermitage, Vessantara heard the noise of horses and elephants and wondered what it was. “Have they killed my father and come here after me?” he asked Maddi. The two of them climbed the hill to see what was going on.

“Can they be hunters looking for wild animals?” Vessantara wondered. “Are they enemies who have come to kill us?” Maddi looked more carefully and saw that it was the army of Sivi. “Do not worry,” she said to her husband. “All will be well. Your enemies could no more hurt you than fire could overcome the sea.”

Reassured by these words, Vessantara returned with her to the hermitage.

King Sanjaya called Queen Phusati and said, “My dear, if we all go together, it will be a great shock for the prince. I will go first, alone. Give me time to greet him. After a few minutes, when you are sure that Vessantara and Maddi are calm and reassured, please bring the children, and come with the rest of the company.”

Accordingly, the king posted guards at each entrance to the camp, mounted his royal elephant, and set out for the hermitage. His heart filled with delight when he beheld his handsome son sitting fearless and self-composed in front of the hut of leaves. As soon as the prince and Maddi saw the king, they went forward to greet him. Maddi knelt and embraced the king’s feet, weeping with joy to see him again.

“I trust, my son, that you are prosperous and well, with plenty of food,” the king greeted Vessantara. “Have you been bothered by insects and wild beasts?”

“Sire,” Vessantara answered, “it is a wretched life that my wife and I lead here, eating what can be gleaned from the forest. Adversity breaks in a man just as a charioteer breaks in a horse. Adversity has tamed us, and the separation from our parents has made us thin and gaunt, as you can see. Our greatest hardship, however, is that Jali and Kanhajina, your hapless heirs, are no longer here. Even now, I fear, they are being goaded and abused by a merciless brahmin. If you know anything of our royal children, please tell me. If you can, please ease my mind.”

“Both Jali and Kanhajina, your lovely children, have been released. I myself paid the brahmin the price you set. Let your heart rest easy, my son, for all is well.”

“Father,” Vessantara said, greatly relieved to hear this wonderful news, “I hope that you are also well. I would like to hear that my mother has recovered from her sorrow and that she no longer weeps for us.”

“Thank you, my son,” the king replied. “Both your mother and I are well.”

“Is the kingdom peaceful and prosperous?” Vessantara continued.

As the king was about to answer, Queen Phusati appeared with a great company. Vessantara and Maddi went to greet her, and Maddi embraced her mother-in-law’s feet. As soon as Jali and Kanhajina saw their mother, they raced forward. The instant Maddi saw the children, she, likewise, ran to meet them. As they threw their arms around each other, laughing and crying, a great quake shook the earth, and lightning flashed across the sky. The entire party swooned, overwhelmed by great emotions of love and joy.

When Sakka saw these six royal personages and their attendants lying senseless on the ground, he sent a gentle shower of rain to revive them. This was, however, a miraculous rain which wetted only those who desired to be wet. When the rain fell on those who wished to remain dry, it rolled off as water rolls off a lotus leaf.

When the courtiers and citizens realized all that had happened, they clamored for Vessantara and Maddi to become their king and queen.

Vessantara turned and faced the king. “Your Majesty,” he said, addressing his father, “when I was a royal prince, even though I was behaving righteously, you and the people banished me from the kingdom.”

“I was wrong to condemn an innocent man!” the king proclaimed. “I made a grievous mistake in heeding the heated and ill-considered opinion of the populace. I erred in driving my virtuous son into exile.”

In a contrite voice, the king spoke pleadingly to his son, “To relieve the suffering of his father and mother, a son should not hesitate to give even his very life, let alone forgiveness of their faults.”

Having heard himself exonerated and having regained the respect of the people and of his father, Vessantara agreed to accept the throne his father sought to abdicate.

“Come, Your Majesty!” the people cried to their new king. “It is time to bathe and to wash off the dirt of the forest.”

“Wait a moment,” Vessantara answered. He went into the hut, took off his ascetic’s clothes, and put them away. When he came out, wearing his royal robes, he announced, “This is the place where I have spent nine and a half months in ascetic practices. It was here that I attained the summit of the Perfection of Generosity. Here the perfection of my giving caused the earth to quake.”

He silently circumambulated the hut clockwise three times and performed the five-point prostration in front of it, touching the earth with knees, forearms, and forehead. At last, he

allowed the courtiers to wash and trim his hair and beard and to pour lustral water over him. As the newly-consecrated king, Vessantara shone in all his glory. When he mounted his richly caparisoned white elephant, surrounded by his sixty thousand courtiers in gorgeous array, joyous music filled the air.

Meanwhile, women attendants bathed Maddi and dressed her in fine robes. As lustral water was sprinkled on her head, the people shouted, “May Vessantara protect our queen!”

Maddi stood beside the children, beaming with joy. “While you were gone, I ate only one meal a day,” she told them, “and I slept upon the bare ground. That was the vow of love I made for you. Now that you are safely back, I pray that you may always be protected by whatever good your father and I have done!”

“Let my daughter-in-law wear these robes and jewels,” Queen Phusati proclaimed as she presented innumerable boxes to Maddi. So magnificent were these adornments that, when Maddi was dressed, she was as beautiful as a nymph from Tavatimsa. Maddi mounted another noble elephant and rode beside Vessantara back to the camp.

The royal party and all the courtiers stayed in the forest for a month, enjoying various games and sports, but, by the glorious virtue of Vessantara, no animal or bird suffered any injury during that time, and no creature harmed another. When it was time for Vessantara to leave the forest, all the birds and beasts came together to pay their respects. When he finally left the woods, it seemed that all the sounds of joy were gone, and only silence remained.

The return journey of sixty yojanas took two months. All along the way, the royal road was adorned with flowers and bunting. When they arrived in Jetuttara, they found the city richly decorated, and all the citizens came out to welcome the new king and queen.

King Vessantara commanded that all creatures in the realm be set free, even the cats, dogs, birds, and fish. Soon after entering the city, he thought, “Tomorrow morning, supplicants who have heard of my return will come to ask me for gifts. What can I give them?” As a result of this noble thought, Sakka’s throne grew hot. As soon as the king of the devas understood the reason, he caused a shower of the seven precious things to fall upon the city, filling the palace grounds waist-high and the city streets knee-deep in precious gems. Vessantara allotted certain areas to various families, but most of the jewels were collected and deposited in a vault in the palace so that he would always have enough to distribute in the future. For the rest of his life, King Vessantara continued giving unstintingly, and, when he died, he was reborn in Tusita heaven.

*Having concluded his story, the Buddha identified the birth: “At that time, Devadatta was Jujaka, Cinca-Manavika was Amittatapana, Channa was the forester, Sariputta was the ascetic Accuta, Anuruddha was Sakka, King Suddhodana was King Sanjaya, Queen Maha-Maya was Phusati, Rahula’s mother was Queen Maddi, Rahula was Prince Jali, Uppalavanna was Princess Kanhajina, my followers were the rest of the people, and I was King Vessantara.”*

From *Jataka Tales of the Buddha: An Anthology*, retold by Ken and Visakha Kawasaki, Volume III, pp. 1217-1250, Tale 217, Buddhist Cultural Centre, Dehiwala, Sri Lanka, 2012, ©Ken and Visakha Kawasaki