

Not One Drop of Blood *Maha-Silava Jataka*



The Buddha told this story while he was staying at Jetavana. When a bhikkhu admitted that he had given up, the Buddha asked him, “How can you quit striving when there is so much to be gained? Long ago, when a wise man had lost his kingdom, through resolution alone, he was able to win it back.” Then he told this story of the past.

Long, long ago, when Brahmadata was reigning in Bārānasi, the Bodhisatta was born as a prince, and his name was Mahā-Sīlava (Virtuous). When he became king, he built six alms-halls—one at each of the city gates, one in the center of the city, and one at his own palace gate. Every day, he distributed alms at each of these halls. He faithfully kept the five precepts and observed the Uposatha days. King Mahā-Sīlava ruled righteously with patience, loving-kindness, and mercy, caring for his subjects like a father.

One day, it was reported to the king that one of his ministers had committed adultery in the palace. The king summoned the minister, examined the evidence, and decided that the man was, indeed, guilty. “You have committed a serious crime,” the king said to the minister. “In any other kingdom, you would probably be executed for what you have done. I will not execute you, but you can no longer stay in my kingdom. You are free to go, but you must take your belongings and leave immediately.”

Rather than expressing remorse and gratitude that his life had been spared, the minister resented being sent into exile and developed an implacable grudge against the king. He left Kāsi and entered the service of the king of Kosala. He rose in favor and, in time, became that monarch’s most trusted counselor.

“Sire,” he said to King Kosala, as they sat in counsel, “the kingdom of Kāsi is extremely rich. It is like a succulent honeycomb, but King Mahā-Sīlava is weak. If you

were to attack Bārānasi, I am confident that he would not even fight. With only a trifling force, you would be able to conquer the entire kingdom.”

King Kosala knew that Kāsi was both large and wealthy. He did not believe that it could be defeated by a small army, so he accused the advisor of trying to lure him into a trap.

“Your Majesty,” the advisor protested, “I am not deceiving you. I would never betray you. I am only telling you the truth. If you doubt me, send some of your men to burn a border village in Kāsi. Let the men be caught, and see how King Mahā-Sīlava treats them. He will not punish them. He will probably load them with gifts and set them free.”

“This man is very bold,” thought the king. “He must know that, if he is lying to me, I will have him killed. Let me test what he says.” The king sent a few soldiers, disguised as outlaws, to harass a village. When the ruffians were captured and taken to Bārānasi, King Mahā-Sīlava asked them, “My sons, why did you bother the peasants in that village and cause so much trouble?”

“We needed money, Sire,” they replied. “We have not been able to make a living.”

“Why didn’t you come to me first?” asked the king. “Don’t do this again.” Presenting each of them with a sack of coins, he said, “You must use this money to begin a business. Now go and prosper.” The soldiers hurried back to report to King Kosala. The king was surprised, but, still, he was cautious.

He sent a second band to attack a village in the very heart of Kāsi. King Mahā-Sīlava treated these men in the same way as he had the first. King Kosala was even more amazed, but he was still not fully convinced. He sent a third party to commit robbery on the streets of Bārānasi itself. When these men were also pardoned with gifts, King Kosala was, at last, satisfied that King Mahā-Sīlava was, indeed, weak and foolish and that it would be easy to capture the kingdom. He immediately set out with troops and elephants.

Actually, the army of Kāsi was very strong. King Mahā-Sīlava had one thousand gallant warriors who would have done anything for their monarch. This matchless band of heroes was prepared to face any charge, even of an elephant in rut, and could have

conquered all of Jambudipa, had the king given the command. When these soldiers heard of King Kosala's approach, they immediately prepared for war and hurried to inform the king. "Sire," they announced, "we will defeat Kosala. We will capture their king before he can even set foot on our soil."

"No, my sons," answered the king. "Not one drop of blood shall be shed because of me. Let those who covet my kingdom take it. You must not fight."

The army of Kosala crossed the border, and the soldiers of Kāsi hurried again to King Mahā-Sīlava. Again, the king refused to give them the order to fight. Facing no resistance, King Kosala led his army all the way to the walls of Bārānasi. A third time, the soldiers of Kāsi begged King Mahā-Sīlava to allow them to defend him and to stop King Kosala. They assured the king that they would destroy the Kosalan forces and prevent them from entering the city. Again, the king refused.

King Kosala sent a message to King Mahā-Sīlava, demanding that he either surrender or suffer defeat in battle. "I will not fight," King Mahā-Sīlava replied, "nor will I surrender. Take my kingdom if you wish."

King Kosala and his men entered the city and marched directly to the royal palace, where they found King Mahā-Sīlava seated on his throne, surrounded by his officers.

"Seize them all!" cried King Kosala. "Tie their hands tightly behind their backs, and take them to the charnel ground! Dig a hole for each one, and bury them up to their necks. The jackals can have a feast and dispose of them for me."

The Kosalan soldiers rushed forward with ropes. King Maha-Silava stood up, placed his hands behind his back, and, with a benign smile, signaled for his men to submit. As one, all of them put down their weapons and put their hands behind their backs. When they had all been bound tightly, the Kosalan soldiers hauled them off to the charnel ground. King Mahā-Sīlava did not allow even a trace of anger toward his captors to cross his mind. So great was the discipline among his men, that not even one dared to protest as they were cruelly dragged away.

Following their king's orders, the Kosalan soldiers buried each of the prisoners up to his neck in a hole, with King Maha-Silava in the middle. Before they left, they firmly tamped the ground around the men's protruding heads, so that the bound victims were

unable to move at all. King Mahā-Sīlava comforted his men and instructed them in radiating loving-kindness to their captors and to all beings.

At midnight, a large pack of jackals entered the charnel ground. At the sight of the beasts, the king and his men shouted in chorus, creating a deafening cry, which frightened the jackals away. After the jackals had run a short distance, however, they realized that no humans were pursuing them, and they crept back to the burying ground. A second shout drove them away again, but, again, they returned. After running away a third time, the emboldened jackals had lost their fear. Even though the men continued shouting louder than before, the jackals did not turn away. They crouched and crept forward, each singling out his own prey, with the leader of the pack making for King Mahā-Sīlava. Remaining calm, the king carefully watched the fierce beast approach and raised his throat as if to receive the animal's bite. At the same instant that the jackal attacked, the king opened his mouth and fastened his teeth on the jackal's throat. Unable to free himself from the king's mighty jaws, the jackal howled in panic. When the other jackals heard this cry of distress, they immediately abandoned their own prey and ran for their lives.

The trapped jackal continued howling as he dug his claws into the ground and jerked madly back and forth, attempting to free himself from the viselike grip of the king's jaws. This loosened the earth around the king. As soon as he was able to move a little, the king released the jackal, who fled in terror. Using his enormous strength to push from side to side, the king was able to free his hands. He clutched the edges of the hole, pulled himself up, and jumped out like a cloud before the wind. Encouraging his companions to be of good cheer, he began digging to free the commander of the army. Then they both dug up and untied other officers. As each man was released, he began digging around another, and, very soon, all of them stood free once more.

It so happened that a corpse had been left in another part of the charnel ground. Two yakkhas who occupied that territory were arguing about how to divide their prize. Unable to decide for themselves, they agreed to appeal to the good King Mahā-Sīlava for judgment. Realizing that the king was nearby, they dragged the corpse to where he stood with his men and said, "Sire, please divide this body, and give us each our share."

“Certainly, my friends,” answered the king, “I would be happy to do that, but I am very dirty. First, I must bathe.”

Using their magic power, the yakkhas instantly brought the scented water which had been prepared for the bath of King Kosala and gave it to King Mahā-Sīlava. Then they brought him the robes which had been laid out for the usurper to wear. They also brought him precious perfumes, flowers, and a jeweled fan in a casket of gold. When he had adorned himself, the yakkhas asked whether they could be of any further service, and the king mentioned that he was hungry. The yakkhas disappeared again, returning immediately with rice and the choicest meat which had also been prepared for the usurper’s table. King Mahā-Sīlava ate some of this delicious food and drank fresh water from the usurper’s golden bowl. After the king had rinsed out his mouth, the yakkhas brought him fragrant betel nut to chew and asked whether he had any further commands.

“Fetch me the Sword of State which lies by the usurper’s pillow,” the king replied. No sooner had he said this than they laid the sword before him. The king set the corpse upright and cut it deftly in two down the breastbone, giving exactly one half to each yakkha. While the yakkhas were contentedly eating their meal, the king washed the blade and strapped the sword to his side.

When they had finished, the yakkhas asked the king what more they could do for him.

“Please use your magic power to carry me to the usurper’s chamber and to return each of my men to his own home.”

“Certainly, Sire,” replied the yakkhas. In the twinkling of an eye King Mahā-Sīlava found himself in his chamber of state, where King Kosala was lying sound asleep on King Mahā-Sīlava’s royal bed. King Mahā-Sīlava struck the usurper on the belly with the flat of his sword. King Kosala opened his eyes and shrank back in terror. “Sire,” he gasped, “aren’t you dead? I had you executed. It is midnight. The doors are locked, and there is a guard outside. How did you get in, sword in hand and dressed in those splendid robes?”

King Mahā-Sīlava calmly explained in detail all that had happened. “Your Majesty!” King Kosala cried out in shame, “Even those fierce yakkhas, who feast on the flesh of

corpses, knew your worth, but I, a human being, could not appreciate your goodness. Now, at last, I understand, and I vow never again to plot against anyone who possesses such singular virtues as you do. Please forgive me,” he begged, as he prostrated himself at King Mahā-Sīlava’s feet. “Forgive my wickedness, and let us be friends as long as we live.” As a token of his sincerity, he insisted that King Mahā-Sīlava lie down on the royal bed while he himself stretched out on a couch nearby.

At dawn, King Kosala ordered a drum to assemble his army in front of the palace. Standing before his men, the king praised King Mahā-Sīlava, formally returned his kingdom to him, and, in the presence of his entire force, again asked the king’s forgiveness. “From now on,” he promised King Mahā-Sīlava, “while you rule your kingdom, I will keep watch to protect you. It will be my duty to deal with rebels.”

Before returning to his own kingdom with all his troops and all his elephants, King Kosala made sure that the advisor who had encouraged him to invade the kingdom of Kāsi and had so maliciously misrepresented King Mahā-Sīlava was duly punished.

Seated in splendor on his golden throne beneath the white canopy of royalty, King Mahā-Sīlava declared, “Had I not persevered, I would not again enjoy this magnificence, nor would my one thousand warriors still be numbered among the living. It was by perseverance that I recovered the royal state I had lost and that I saved the lives of my one thousand loyal men. Seeing that the fruit of perseverance is so excellent, we should all strive on with dauntless hearts, despite all odds.”

King Mahā-Sīlava continued to rule righteously and passed away to fare according to his deserts.

Having concluded his story, the Buddha taught the Dhamma, and the backsliding bhikkhu attained arahatship. Then the Buddha identified the birth: “At that time, Devadatta was the treacherous minister, my followers were the one thousand warriors, and I was the great King Mahā-Sīlava.”

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