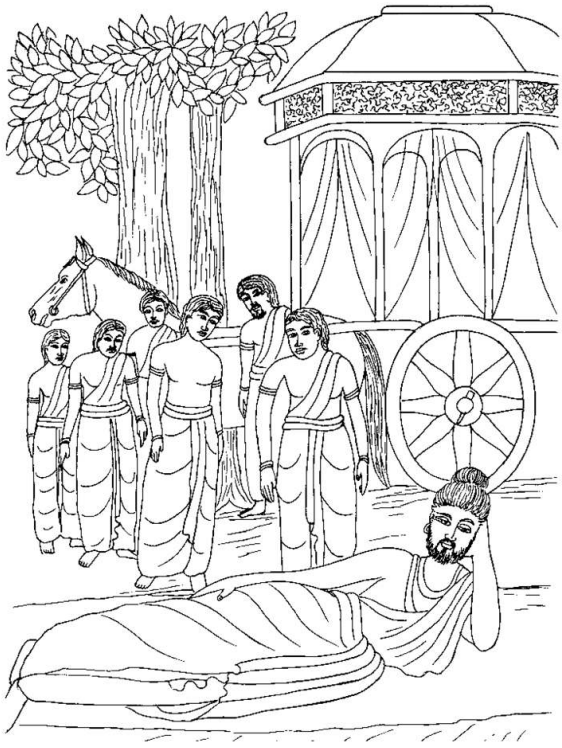

Maha-Janaka
Maha Janaka Jataka

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

One day, in the Hall of Truth, bhikkhus were talking about the Buddha's Great Renunciation. When the Buddha learned what they were discussing, he said, "This is not the first time that the Tathagata made a great renunciation." At their request, he told this story of the past.

Long, long ago, there was a king named Maha-Janaka reigning in Mithila, the capital of Videha. He had two sons: Arittha-Janaka, the elder, who was the crown prince, and Pola-Janaka, the younger, who was the commander-in-chief. When King Maha-Janaka died, Arittha-Janaka became king, and he promoted his younger brother to crown prince.

Almost immediately, someone in the palace started a rumor that Pola-Janaka was scheming to kill his brother and to usurp the throne. King Arittha-Janaka heard this rumor so often that he finally arrested his brother. In spite of Pola-Janaka's pleas of innocence, the king had him bound in chains and imprisoned near the palace.

Prince Pola-Janaka declared, "I swear that I have neither ill-will nor any wrong intentions toward my brother. If this is true, let these chains fall from my hands and the door swing open!" As soon as he had made this asseveration of truth, his chains fell, and the door flew open.

The prince immediately fled to the frontier. Villagers there recognized him and, believing in his innocence, helped him hide so that his brother could not re-arrest him.

In time, Prince Pola-Janaka gained the trust and support of all the villages along the border. "When I left Mithila," he proclaimed, "I was not my brother's enemy, but now I surely am!" With a large force, he set out for Mithila. As he approached the capital, his army grew steadily larger. He camped outside the city gate, and many from inside the city came out to join his force. He sent a message to his brother, "When I was living in Mithila, I was not your enemy, but I am now! Cede your kingdom, or fight to defend it!"

As the king went off to fight, he said to the queen, "Lady, war is unpredictable. If I die, please take care of the child in your womb." Not long afterwards, Pola-Janaka's soldiers killed the king and defeated his army.

As soon as the queen learned that her husband was dead, she put her gold, jewels, and other valuables in a basket, spread a napkin over them, and covered everything with a layer of uncooked rice. Dressing herself in some soiled and tattered clothes and smearing her face and hair with dirt, she placed the basket on her head and left the palace by the servants' entrance. No one recognized her that morning as she made her way to the northern gate of the city. Once outside the city walls, she did not know

which way to go, for she had never traveled before. She had heard of Campa, and she knew that it was the name of a city, so she asked passers-by whether they were going that way.

Since the child in the queen's womb was the Bodhisatta, Sakka's throne became hot. Realizing that the Bodhisatta was in danger, the king of the devas descended to earth. He created a covered carriage with a bed in it and disguised himself as an old driver. As he passed the queen, he asked loudly if anyone wanted to go to Campa.

"That is where I want to go, Father," said the queen.

"Then climb into this carriage, lady, and take your seat," Sakka told her. "Father," she protested, "I am expecting a baby soon, so I dare not climb up. I will follow behind the carriage. Please, just let me put my basket inside because it is heavy."

"What are you saying, Mother?" asked Sakka. "There is no carriage like mine!" Using his supernatural power, Sakka caused the earth where the queen was standing to rise to the level of the carriage the moment the queen started to climb into it. "Just step in!" he said. She did so, and, finding the bed, she lay down and immediately fell asleep.

At midday, Sakka stopped the carriage at a river. "Mother," he called gently, "please get down and bathe in the river. At the head of the bed you'll find some fresh clothes to change into." As she was getting back into the carriage, he said, "Beside the bed is a rice cake for you to eat." After she had eaten, she lay down again.

In the evening, she could see a watchtower in the wall of what appeared to be a great city. "What city is that, Father?" she asked. "That is Campa, Mother." Sakka replied

"How can that be, Father?" she asked. "Isn't it sixty yojanas from Mithila to Campa?"

"Yes, it is, Mother," he replied, "but I know a shortcut."

He stopped the carriage at the southern gate and said, "Mother, my village lies further on, but you can enter the city here." When she was safely out of the carriage, he drove away. As soon as he was out of sight, he returned to Tavatimsa.

The queen entered a public resthouse beside the gate and sat down. At that moment, a brahmin with his five hundred students passed by on their way to bathe. As soon as he saw her sitting there, looking so regal and so beautiful, by the power of the Bodhisatta in her womb, he felt an immediate affection for her as for a youngest sister. Leaving his students outside, he went alone into the resthouse and asked her, "Sister, where do you come from?"

"I am the chief queen of King Arittha-Janaka in Mithila," she said. "Why have you come here?" he asked.

"My husband, the king, was killed by his brother, Pola-Janaka. I fled in fear to save the life of my unborn child."

"Do you have any relatives in this city?"

"None, Brother."

"Do not worry. I am a well-known teacher here. I will watch over you as if we were siblings of the same mother. Now, in a loud voice, shout 'Brother!' clasp my feet, and cry as if we have been reunited after a long separation."

She did so, and he lifted her up. As the two of them were embracing, the students rushed up to see what was happening. He explained that she was his youngest sister, who was born after he had left

home.

"Oh, Teacher!" the students cried. "It is wonderful that you have found her after all this time!"

He ordered some of his students to arrange for a grand covered carriage. As soon as it arrived, he placed her in it and sent her to his own house. He instructed the driver to tell his wife that this was his sister and that his wife was to make her feel at home.

The brahmin's wife treated the queen with great respect, giving her a hot bath and preparing a bed for her. When the brahmin returned home, he told the servants to call his sister so that she could eat with him.

Shortly after her arrival, the queen gave birth to a healthy son, whom she named Maha-Janaka after his grandfather. As the child was growing up, he played with the children in the neighborhood. One day, his playmates were talking about their parents. Some of them boasted about their own birth, and teased him that he did not have a father. Being a sturdy lad, he hit them in retaliation, and made them cry. When their parents asked who had hit them, they answered, "The widow's son."

The little prince went home and said, "Mother, my playmates always call me the widow's son. Who is my father?"

The queen did not yet want to reveal that he was a prince, so she replied, "The brahmin is your father."

The next day, when his playmates again teased him, he shouted, "The brahmin is my father!"

"How can he be your father?" they retorted. "He's your mother's brother!"

The prince had not yet been weaned, so, that evening, while he was nursing, he took his mother's breast in his teeth and said, "Tell me the truth! Who is my father? If you don't tell me, I will bite your nipple."

Realizing that she could no longer deceive him, she said, "My child, you are the only son of King Arittha-Janaka of Mithila. Before you were born, your father was killed by your uncle, Pola-Janaka. I fled to this city to save you. To protect us, the good brahmin has treated me as his sister and taken care of us as if we were his own family."

After that, Maha-Janaka did not get angry when his playmates called him the widow's son, but he never told anyone the truth. He grew into a handsome young man, mastering every subject and exhibiting skill in all the arts.

When he reached sixteen, he asked his mother if she had any money for him. "If you don't," he said, "I will go into trade to make money, and I will regain my father's kingdom."

"Dear son, I did not come here empty-handed," she told him. "I have a great store of pearls, rubies, and diamonds. Take it all. It is enough to win the throne. You don't need to go into trade."

"No, Mother," he replied, "I will only take half of what you have. I will use that to travel to Suvannabhūmi. I'll make my fortune and return to seize the kingdom."

His mother begged him not to do such a foolish thing. She warned him that there were great dangers at sea and that his chances of making a profit were very slim. Despite her pleas, he was determined to try his luck. He joined with six other traders and invested half of her wealth. The group loaded a ship with expensive goods, wagons, and oxen and left for Suvannabhūmi.

The vessel sailed for seven hundred yojanas, but, after a week, it hit rough water and sprang a leak. Planks gave way, the water rose, and the ship began to sink. The crew and the merchants cried and

invoked their various deities, but Maha-Janaka neither wept nor prayed. Knowing that the ship was doomed, he smeared his body and clothing with ghee, ate as many rations as he could manage, and climbed to the top of the main mast.

As the ship sank beneath the surface, the mast remained upright, but the men and animals on the deck became food for the sharks and turtles. The water around the submerged vessel turned blood red as it was churned up by their frenzy.

From the top of the mast, Prince Maha-Janaka threw himself with all his strength in the direction of Mithila. He landed in the emerald sea, safely beyond the ravenous predators.

On the day that Prince Maha-Janaka had embarked for Suvannabhœmi, King Pola-Janaka had fallen seriously ill and was unable to leave his bed. As the ship sank, the king died.

For seven days, Maha-Janaka swam steadily without changing his pace. When he saw the full moon rise, he rinsed his mouth with salt water and began observing Uposatha.

In that sea, a female deva named Manimekhala had been appointed guardian by the Four Great Kings. In charging her with her duty, they had told her, "Beings who are virtuous, who respect their parents, and who observe Uposatha do not deserve to perish in the sea. If any virtuous people become shipwrecked, you must save them."

For the seven days that Maha-Janaka had been swimming, Manimekhala had been absorbed in her divine happiness and had neglected to look about. At last, recollecting her responsibility, she surveyed the water and saw Maha-Janaka struggling. When she noticed that he was observing Uposatha, she thought, "If Prince Maha-Janaka had perished because I was remiss, I would have lost my place in the divine assembly! Now I must save him, but, first, let me test him!"

Assuming a beautiful form, she stood in the air not far from where he was swimming and asked, "Young man, why are you striving manfully in mid-ocean? Are you all alone? Where are your friends?"

Maha-Janaka thought, "I have been swimming for seven days. All this time, I have not seen another living being. This must be a deva who is speaking to me now!" Aloud he said, "As long as I am alive, I see it as my duty to strive with all my strength."

"Well, it seems obvious to me that here in the deep sea your striving is useless," Manimekhala replied. "There's nothing you can do, and you are going to drown!"

"Why do you say that?" Maha-Janaka retorted. "If I struggle as hard as I can, I cannot be blamed even if I die. He who does as much as he can should not feel ashamed if he fails."

"Why exhaust yourself for nothing?" the deva taunted him. "Since you are going to die anyway, you might as well relax!"

"The man who thinks that there is no chance to win and, thus, gives up without a fight is the one who should be blamed when he loses!" Maha-Janaka declared. "Only the future will show whether our plans will succeed or fail. Don't you see, friend deva? My struggling has kept me alive this far, whereas all my companions on the same ship drowned. The ship sank, but I saved myself. Now here I am, and you are standing by my side. As long as I am alive, I will struggle as hard as I can to get through these ocean waves and to reach the shore. As long as my strength holds out, I will strive until I can strive no more."

"You are truly brave," Manimekhala shouted, "to continue fighting on in this fierce, unbounded sea, struggling to do your duty like a man, never wavering, never shrinking from your task! Tell me

where you wish to go. There will be no more obstacles to hamper you!"

"My destination is Mithila!" Maha-Janaka loudly proclaimed. Manimekhala lifted him gently from the water as if he were her own child and sped toward Mithila. As they flew through the air, the prince, his body wet with salt spray, was lulled by the heavenly contact, and he slept soundly.

Manimekhala carried the prince to the royal park and laid him on his right side on the ceremonial stone in the mango grove. Leaving him in the care of the devas of the park, she returned to the sea.

King Pola-Janaka, having left no son, was survived by only one daughter, a wise and learned princess named Sivali. On his deathbed, ministers had asked the king who should succeed him, and he had replied, "Give the kingdom to the man who can please my daughter Sivali, who can determine the head of the square bed, who can string my bow, and who can find the sixteen great treasures."

The ministers had asked what he meant by the sixteen great treasures, and he had replied, "The rising sun and the setting sun; outside, inside, and neither outside nor inside; the mounting, the dismounting, the four sal pillars, and a yojana around; the ends of the teeth, the end of the tail, kebuka, and the ends of the trees. There the sixteen great treasures can be found."

Seven days after King Pola-Janaka's funeral, the ministers met to discuss the succession. "The king's first stipulation was that the kingdom should go to one who pleased his daughter," they recalled. "Who might that be?"

They all agreed that the commander-in-chief had always been a favorite of the king. They decided to let him try.

The commander-in-chief went to door of the princess' apartment and announced his presence.

She knew very well why he had come, so she tested him to see if he had the wisdom necessary to rule. "Come here," she called.

Eager to please her, he raced up the stairs and stopped in front of her. "Run back down the stairs!" she commanded him.

He turned around and ran down the stairs as fast as he could.

As soon as he was at the bottom, she called, "Come here!" and the commander-in-chief ran up the stairs again.

Perceiving his lack of wisdom, she commanded, "Massage my feet!" He immediately knelt and put his hands on her feet.

The princess kicked him in the chest, knocking him flat on his back. Then she ordered her attendants to beat him and to throw him out.

When the ministers saw him, they asked about his meeting with the princess.

"Don't ask!" he replied. "She's not human!"

The ministers successively sent the treasurer, the cashier, the keeper of the umbrella, and the sword bearer, but the princess embarrassed them all in the same way.

The ministers met again. "The king's second stipulation was that the kingdom should go to one who could determine the head of the square bed," they recalled. The ministers showed the square bed to innumerable suitors, but no one could figure out which side was the head.

The ministers met again. "The king's third stipulation was that the kingdom should go to one who could string his bow," they recalled. The ministers had the bow brought out, but, since it took one thousand men to string the mighty weapon, no one could do anything with it.

The ministers met again. “The king’s fourth stipulation was that the kingdom should go to one who could find the sixteen great treasures,” they recalled. The ministers recited the clues which the king had taught them, but no one could understand any part of the meaning.

“The kingdom cannot last without a king!” cried the populace. “We need a king!”

The ministers met again to discuss the problem. The chief advisor suggested that the royal chariot could choose the new king by means of divination. He explained that, if the chariot, bearing the five symbols of royalty, were sent through the streets, it would stop in front of the man who was suitable to become king.

The ministers all agreed that this was a good suggestion. The city was beautifully decorated, and a proclamation was made. The royal chariot was hitched to four superb horses and the royal symbols were placed inside it. After a ceremony asking the heavens to give them a ruler, the chariot was sent out. The horses circled the palace and turned onto the main road, with the ministers and a large group of citizens silently following behind.

The commander-in-chief and other officials thought the chariot was coming for one of them. They each stepped forward, but the chief advisor stopped them. “Don’t interfere!” he warned. “Let the chariot stop where it will, even if it has to go one hundred yojanas.” Of course, the chariot passed them all by. The horses continued all around the city and exited by the eastern gate, heading toward the royal park. The horses pulled the chariot into the park, slowed to a walk, and sedately circled the great ceremonial stone. They stopped there as if waiting for the king to mount the chariot.

The chief advisor saw Maha-Janaka and said to the ministers, “Sirs, someone is lying on the stone, so we must determine whether he is worthy of the white umbrella. If he is an ordinary man, when he wakes up, he will jump up in alarm. If he has merit, he will not look at us. Have the musicians begin playing!”

The royal musicians began beating their drums and blowing their horns, which created a terrific din. Maha-Janaka awoke and looked round. When he saw the huge throng of people, he realized that the white umbrella had come to him, so he turned and lay on his left side.

The chief advisor examined Maha-Janaka’s feet and exclaimed, “This man has the marks of one who will not rule only one continent but all four! Sound the instruments again!”

The musicians began again, even more loudly than before. Maha-Janaka uncovered his face, turned onto his right side, and looked at the crowd. The chief advisor paid his respects and said, “Rise, Your Majesty! The kingdom belongs to you.”

“Where is the king?” the prince asked.

“He is dead.”

“Didn’t he leave a son or brother?”

“No, Your Majesty.”

“All right,” he said as he roused himself and sat cross-legged on the stone slab. “I will accept the kingdom.”

The ministers brought out lustral water and anointed him on the stone. The new king mounted the chariot and accepted the symbols of royalty. The chariot carried him into the city. He entered the palace and began discussing arrangements with the ministers.

The princess, wishing to test Maha-Janaka, instructed a servant, “Tell the king that I wish to see

him, and tell him to come immediately."

Ignoring the princess' summons, King Maha-Janaka continued explaining to the ministers how he wanted his court to be organized.

The servant returned and told the princess that the king had paid no attention to her message. The princess realized that Maha-Janaka was indeed a man of lofty nature. To be sure, she sent a second and a third messenger, each with the same result.

When the king had concluded his conference with the ministers, he proceeded to the throne room at his stately pace and began climbing the stairs of the dais. The princess could not resist his majestic bearing and stepped forward to give him her hand. Gently leaning on her hand, he ascended the dais and seated himself on the throne beneath the white umbrella. "Did the king leave any instructions when he died?" he asked the ministers.

"Yes, he did," they replied. "He said that the kingdom should go to the one who could please Princess Sivali."

The king replied, "You saw that Princess Sivali gave me her hand to lean on. I have succeeded in pleasing her. What else did he say?"

"He said that the kingdom should go to the one who could determine the head of the square bed," they replied.

When they showed him the square bed, he said, "All four sides look the same, so this is rather difficult to determine, but it can be done." He took a golden needle from his turban and handed it to the princess. "My dear," he said, "please put this in its proper place." She carefully laid the needle on one side of the bed.

The king pointed at the spot where the golden needle lay and said, "That is the head of the square bed!" The ministers were extremely satisfied. "What else did he say?" Maha-Janaka asked.

"He said that the kingdom should go to the one who could string his bow which requires the strength of one thousand men," the ministers replied.

He asked them to bring him the bow, and, while still sitting on the bed, he strung it as easily as if it had been a carding bow.

"What else did he say?" Maha-Janaka asked.

"He said that the kingdom should go to the one who could find the sixteen great treasures," the ministers replied.

"What are the clues?" he asked.

The ministers recited the list, "The rising sun and the setting sun; outside, inside, and neither outside nor inside; the mounting, the dismounting, the four sal pillars, and a yojana around; the ends of the teeth, the end of the tail, kebuka, and the ends of the trees. There the sixteen great treasures can be found."

As Maha-Janaka listened to these clues, the meaning became as clear to him as the moon in the sky. "There is not time today," he said. "We will reveal the treasures tomorrow."

The next day, the king assembled the ministers and asked them, "Did your king feed Pacceka Buddhas?"

"Yes, he did," they replied.

"When the Pacceka Buddhas came, where did he greet them?" When they showed him the place,

he explained, “When the king spoke of the rising sun, he did not mean the sun in the sky. Pacceka Buddhas

are sometimes compared to the sun. Let us dig here.” Workers dug at the spot where the king had greeted Pacceka Buddhas and discovered a pot of gold.

“Where did the king stand when he bade farewell to the Pacceka Buddhas?” King Maha-Janaka asked.

They showed him the place, and he ordered the workers to dig there. They found a second pot of gold.

The entire court was thrilled by King Maha-Janaka’s wisdom and applauded. They recalled how others had wandered about, watching the rising sun and digging here and there, without finding anything.

“Outside and inside,” King Maha-Janaka explained, “must refer to the palace. Let us dig just outside the palace gate.” He ordered workers to do so, and they discovered a third pot of gold. He had them dig just inside the palace gate, and they discovered a fourth. They discovered a fifth directly below the threshold of the gate itself, neither outside nor inside.

“Now,” King Maha-Janaka continued, “show me where the king mounted his royal elephant.” When the ministers showed him that place in the courtyard, he said, “This must be what the king referred to as `the mounting.’” He ordered workers to dig there, and they discovered a sixth pot of gold. They discovered a seventh pot of gold at the place where the king dismounted from the royal elephant.

“In the palace,” King Maha-Janaka continued, “is a couch where the king reclines when courtiers come to pay their respects. What kind of wood is that couch made of?” he asked.

“Your Majesty,” the ministers replied, “it is made of the finest sal wood.”

“That’s what I thought,” King Maha-Janaka replied. “Please show it to me.”

He ordered workers to move the couch and to remove the stones on which the four legs had rested. Under each stone, they found a pot of gold. “These are the four sal pillars,” explained the king. Everyone applauded this further display of wisdom.

“The next clue is “a yojana around,” King Maha-Janaka continued. “Now a yojana is as far as one yoke of oxen can travel, so the yoke itself is sometimes called a yojana. Let us now replace the royal couch to its original position.” The workers did so. “Now,” Maha-Janaka continued, “please dig around the couch at a distance equal to the length of the yoke of the ox-cart.” The workers did so, and discovered a twelfth pot of gold.

“The ends of the teeth” the king continued,” must refer to the spot below the tips of the tusks of the royal elephant when he is standing in his stable.” The workers dug there and discovered a thirteenth pot of gold. “The end of the tail must refer to the spot below the tail of the royal stallion when he is standing in his stall.” The workers discovered a fourteenth pot of gold there.

“‘Kebuka’ is a very old word for water,” explained the king. “Let us drain the royal lake.” When that was done, workers found a fifteenth pot of gold. “The ends of the trees,” the king concluded, “must refer to the edge of the circle of shade of the great sal trees in the royal park at noon.” The workers dug there and discovered the sixteenth pot of gold.

Everyone in the court shouted their approval and applauded wildly.

“Did the king say anything else?” Maha-Janaka asked.

"No, Your Majesty," the ministers replied, "he did not."

"These sixteen pots of gold," declared King Maha-Janaka, "are to be used to erect five alms-halls, one at each of the city gates and one in the city center." When the buildings were finished, the king personally distributed alms there every day.

King Maha-Janaka was eager to see his mother again, so he invited her and the brahmin to move from Campa to Mithila. When they came, the king paid them great honor and provided them with a fine house.

The news of King Maha-Janaka's wisdom and triumphs spread throughout the kingdom, and people thronged to Mithila for the coronation festival. The city was gaily decorated and every household prepared gifts to offer to the king. The city was filled with musicians, singers, dancers, jugglers, and magicians. In the palace, King Maha-Janaka sat on a magnificent throne on a splendid dais under the white umbrella. On one side, sat the ministers and advisors, and, on the other side, sat the wealthy citizens of Mithila. As he was sitting there, King Maha-Janaka recollected his ordeal in the ocean. "If I had not shown courage and determination in the great ocean, I never would have attained this glory!" he thought. "Certainly, in every situation, striving is the right thing to do!" This thought filled his mind with joy.

King Maha-Janaka ruled Videha with wisdom and righteousness, scrupulously observing the ten duties of a king. He delighted in serving Pacceka Buddhas whenever they visited the city. In time, Queen Sivali gave birth to a healthy son who had all the auspicious omens, and they named him Dighavu. When Prince Dighavu grew up, he was designated crown prince.

One day, the royal gardener brought a large basket of fresh fruit and another of fresh flowers to the palace. The king was extremely pleased. He rewarded the gardener and told him to prepare the park for a royal visit.

As soon as the park was ready, the king mounted the royal elephant and rode out, followed by his retinue. At the entrance to the park, there were two magnificent mango trees, one without fruit and the other laden with sweet yellow mangoes. Since the king had not yet eaten any of the fruit, no one else dared to touch it. As the elephant passed by the tree, the king reached out, picked a particularly succulent, ripe mango, and bit into it. The moment he tasted the tender flesh of the mango, he was thrilled by the divine flavor. "When I return, I will have some more," he thought as he continued into the garden.

Later, as he was leaving the park, he saw that the barren tree was still as beautiful as a mountain of emeralds. The other tree, however, was in a dreadful state. Its branches had not only been stripped bare of fruit and leaves but had been severely bent and broken. As soon as the populace had seen the king take fruit from the tree, they had descended en masse to gather fruit for themselves.

The king was greatly moved by this contrast. "The tree without any mangoes has been able to maintain its leaves and its beautiful shape, but the tree laden with mangoes has been almost destroyed. The barren tree is much more fortunate than the fruitful one. The man who owns property has constant worries and fears, but the man who owns nothing is free of anxiety. We might say that the life of a king is like the fruitful tree and that the life of an ascetic is like the barren tree. I do not want to be like the fruitful tree; I want to become like the barren one! I will renounce the world and become an ascetic!"

When King Maha-Janaka returned to the palace, he summoned the commander-in-chief. "General,"

the king announced, “today, I am turning the affairs of the kingdom over to you and the chief judge. The two of you are to govern the kingdom. I will live as an ascetic on the top floor of the palace. I will need only one servant to bring me food, water, and other requisites. No one else is to see my face.”

The courtiers were sad not to be able to see the king. They wondered why he was no longer interested in ruling the kingdom. They could not understand why he no longer took pleasure in music and dance. One day, they asked the servant about the king’s well-being.

“The king does not talk to me any more,” the servant replied, “but I have seen him deep in meditation. He looks detached and peaceful. He never asks me for anything. The other day, though, I overheard him talking. He was saying, ‘Who will guide me to the place where the Pacceka Buddhas stay? They have left behind all desires and, in a stormy world, they alone roam at peace. Where can I find those wise beings who, freed from all ties, are clear-eyed and sorrowless? Where do they reside?’ Of course,” the servant continued, “no one knows where the Pacceka Buddhas are. They come and go as they please.”

At this time, the life span for human beings was ten thousand years. Maha-Janaka had been king for almost seven thousand years, so he still had three thousand years of his life remaining. He had been living like an ascetic on the top floor of the palace for only four months, but he was not contented. Ever since he had seen the two mango trees and had resolved to become an ascetic, the palace seemed like a prison, like hell. Often, he sat in his room and moaned, “When will I be able to leave Mithila? Even though this city is spacious and beautiful, well-designed, prosperous, and lively, I long for the Himavat! I want to wander through the forest in solitude, subsisting on fruit and turning my mind to meditation!” At last, he felt that the time had come, and he decided to leave the capital and to become a true ascetic.

After secretly instructing his servant to procure yellow robes and an earthen pot from the market, he sent for a barber to cut his hair and beard. He donned the yellow robes and, feeling very much like an ascetic, resolved to leave the next morning.

Early that same morning, Queen Sivali told the most beautiful concubines to dress with special care and led them to visit the king. As she was ascending the staircase, she met the king as he was coming down, but, mistaking him for a Pacceka Buddha, she made a respectful salutation and stood to one side. When she reached the top floor and saw the king’s freshly-shorn locks lying on the floor, she realized whom she had seen on the stairs.

“Come, friends!” she shouted to the other women as she hurried back down the staircase. “We must beg the king to come back!” Catching up with the king in the courtyard, the queen and her attendants loosened their hair, beat their breasts, and began wailing plaintively, “Why are you leaving us, Your Majesty? Please do not abandon us!” In this way, they followed him through the gate of the palace.

Their cries disturbed the whole city, and many people joined them. “Please stay, Your Majesty!” they shouted. “How will we ever find such a just and good ruler again?”

King Maha-Janaka continued walking as if he were alone.

Queen Sivali sent a message to the commander-in-chief, instructing him to set fire to several derelict houses near the city gate and to ignite brush fires throughout the city. As soon as she could see the smoke, she fell at the king’s feet and cried, “Your Majesty, Mithila is in flames! You must return and save your city!”

“What are you saying, Queen?” the king replied. “I no longer have a city. We, who own nothing

of our own, live without a care. Mithila's palaces may burn, but nothing of mine is consumed by those flames." He continued walking and left the city by the northern gate.

Queen Sivali sent another message instructing the commander-in-chief to create the illusion of a disturbance in the northern villages. Very soon, armed men were running here and there. Villagers ran past the king shouting, "Help! Brigands are destroying our houses!" Others hurried past bearing stretchers on which lay men and women daubed with red lac, simulating blood.

The queen again fell at the king's feet and cried, "Your Majesty, bandits are wreaking havoc throughout the land! Please do not desert the kingdom in our time of need!"

The king knew that no bandits would dare rise up while he was still king and that this was Sivali's doing. Calmly, he replied, "Those of us who have nothing live without a care. Truly, the kingdom may be despoiled, but nothing of mine can be harmed." He continued walking away from the city, but many people followed, crying for him to return.

"If these people do not return to the city of their own accord," he thought, "I must make them go back." Standing on a rise in the road, he turned to the ministers who had followed him and asked, "Whose kingdom is this?"

"It is yours, Sire," they replied.

"In that case," declared the king, drawing a line with his staff across the road, "I order you to punish anyone who steps over this line!" He turned and walked on.

Not daring to disobey his command, the crowd stood as if frozen and cried, "Your Majesty! Please come back!" Even the queen herself dared not cross the line, but she was so overcome with emotion that she swooned and fell across the line. Suddenly someone shouted, "Look! The queen has crossed the line! We can, too!" Everyone surged across and followed the king.

Maha-Janaka walked in the direction of the Himavat. For sixty yojanas, he was followed by the queen, her attendants, the army, the royal horses and elephants, and innumerable citizens of Videha.

At that time, an ascetic named Narada, who was meditating in a cave in the Himavat, arose from seven days of ecstatic bliss and surveyed all of Jambudipa to see if there was anyone else seeking that bliss. He immediately perceived Maha-Janaka and realized that, having made his great renunciation, the king was unable to turn back the multitude of followers. "These people, including the queen, are an obstacle to him." Narada thought. "I must give him an exhortation to strengthen him in his purpose."

With his supernatural power, he stood in the air in front of the king and asked, "Ascetic, what is all this noise? It sounds like a festival! Why is this great crowd gathered around you?"

Maha-Janaka replied: "I have cut all bonds. With a happy heart, I've left the world, but these folks are begging me to return."

"Don't suppose that you have already reached your goal," Narada admonished him. "There are still many hindrances yet to overcome."

"Nothing can sway me from my determination!" Maha-Janaka exclaimed. "What could possibly interfere with my progress as I press onwards to my goal?"

"Drowsiness, laziness, daydreaming, temptation, and discontent— these are some of the foes you must conquer before claiming victory!"

"Thank you, Sage!" Maha-Janaka shouted. "You have given me some wise words of warning, and I thank you with all my heart! Please tell me who you are."

“I am known as Narada. My last advice to you is to keep company with other sages and to meditate on the Four Brahma Viharas. Face any shortcoming or lack with patience and serenity. Neither pride nor self-abasement suits a sage. Let virtue, knowledge, and the law guard you on your way.” He bade Maha-Janaka farewell and returned to his cave.

Another ascetic, who was named Migajina, had also just arisen from an ecstatic trance. When he saw Maha-Janaka, he also decided to offer him advice. He stood in the air in front of Maha-Janaka and said, “I see that you have forsaken a kingdom. Have your subjects, your advisors, your family, or your friends wounded your heart and caused you to seek refuge here?”

“I have done no wrong to anyone,” Maha-Janaka replied, “and none has done me any wrong. I saw suffering all around; I saw beings helplessly caught up in the world. I took this as a warning and began my ascetic’s life.”

“Surely, no one would choose the ascetic’s life without a teacher to guide him,” Migajina said. “Who encouraged you to leave your life of ease?”

“No one urged me to become an ascetic,” Maha-Janaka replied. “Let me tell you what happened. As I was leaving my royal park one day, surrounded by courtiers and companions, I saw a mango tree, despoiled and broken by the throngs that sought its fruit. Nearby was another mango tree still in all its glory for the simple reason that it was barren. The fruitful tree was forlorn, with leaves stripped and branches bare, while the unproductive tree was still green and strong, untouched by the multitude. I realized that we kings are like that fruitful tree, with many a foe to rob us of our fruits. The elephant is slain for ivory, the panther for his skin. In the end, all will be separated from their pride, their wealth, and their joy. It is better to leave it all now and to seek wisdom through solitude. Those two trees were my teachers, and from them I learned to see the better way.”

Migajina, having heard the king, exhorted him to be steadfast and returned to his own abode.

When he was gone, Queen Sivali fell at the king’s feet, and said: “Sire, your subjects are bereft at your leaving. Please comfort them. Before you go, crown your son to rule in your place. Then, if you must, leave the world and wander on alone!”

“Lady,” Maha-Janaka replied, “I have already left behind subjects, home, family, and kingdom. Those are no more to me.”

“My Lord,” the queen cried out in desperation, “if you become an ascetic, what shall I do?”

“Do as you please, but, if you teach my son to rule while sinning in thought, word, and deed, you will meet an evil end. A beggar’s portion, received as alms, say the wise, is all we need!”

As Maha-Janaka counseled the queen, the sun set. The courtiers and the citizens resigned themselves to the loss of the king and turned back. The queen, firm in her resolve to follow the king and to persuade him to give up his quest, stayed on. She ordered that part of the army and a few ministers follow her, as well. Maha -Janaka withdrew to the root of a tree to pass the night, and the queen encamped in a suitable place. Early the next morning, after performing his ablutions, Maha-Janaka went on his way; the queen stayed close to him, and the army and ministers followed.

That morning, in the city of Thuna, a man had bought a large piece of meat from the market, put it on a skewer, and grilled it over some coals. When it was nicely cooked, he had placed it on a board to cool and had gone on with his work. While his back was turned, a stray dog had grabbed the meat and run off with it in his mouth. The man had given chase as far as the southern gate of the city but,

finally, out of breath, had given up.

At that moment, it so happened that Maha-Janaka and the queen were approaching the gate from different directions. The dog saw them, and, fearful of being cornered, dropped the meat and ran away. Maha-Janaka saw the meat and waited to see whether anyone claimed it. When he was sure that it had been truly abandoned, he picked it up, wiped it off, and put it in his earthen bowl. Finding a pleasant spot beside a small spring, he sat down and began to eat.

When the queen saw this, she thought, "If he were worthy to rule the kingdom, he would never eat the filthy leavings of a dog. He is not really my husband at all!" Aloud she asked, "Sire, how can you eat such a disgusting piece of garbage?"

"It is your own blindness," Maha-Janaka replied, "that prevents you from seeing the special value of this piece of alms."

"Even if he is dying of starvation," she retorted, "a noble person would be loath to eat such a revolting mess as that! Have you no shame, Sire?"

"The leavings of neither a householder nor a dog," Maha-Janaka replied, "are forbidden food. If obtained by lawful means, all food is pure." Calmly, he continued eating, savoring the meat as if it were ambrosia. Then he rinsed his mouth with water.

Sivali was still following him when he returned to the city gate. Some children were playing there, and one girl was shaking some sand in a small winnowing basket. On one wrist, she had a one bangle, and, on the other wrist, she had two, which jangled against each other. Maha-Janaka noticed this and thought, "Sivali keeps following me. A wife is a curse to an ascetic. People will blame me, saying that, even though I have left the world, I cannot leave my wife. This girl will be able to tell Sivali why she should turn back and leave me alone." Standing beside the girl, he asked, "Child, why is one of your wrists so musical while your other wrist is quiet?"

The girl replied: "Ascetic, on this arm, there are two bangles, which jangle when they strike each other. On the other arm, the single bangle is silent because it is alone. The pair are noisy, but the one is quiet. It is peaceful on its own. Only one who is alone is happy."

"Listen to what this young girl says!" Maha-Janaka said to Sivali. "Her words are true. Your accompanying me is a cause for shame, and, for it, I will suffer all the blame. Here are two paths. You go by one, and I will take the other. Do not refer to me as your husband any longer. You are no longer my wife. Goodbye."

The queen told him to take the better path to the right, and she went off to the left. After a short time, however, she was so overcome with grief that she turned back and hurried to catch up with him. As he entered the city of Thuna, she was again following him.

On his almsrounds in the city, Maha-Janaka arrived at the house of a fletcher, who was busy working. Maha-Janaka stood at one side while the fletcher heated an arrow in a pan of coals, wetted it with some sour rice-gruel, and, closing one eye, held it to the other eye to see whether it was perfectly straight. "Perhaps this man," Maha-Janaka reflected, "can teach Sivali a lesson."

"Sir," Maha-Janaka said, "why do you close one eye and gaze intently with the other? Does that improve your sight?"

The fletcher replied, "The wide horizon, which both eyes give, distracts me. By using only one eye, I get a single line, my aim is fixed, and my vision is true."

Maha-Janaka silently continued on his rounds. Having collected enough food, he found a pleasant spot outside the city and sat to take his meal. When he finished, he said to Sivali, "The fletcher's words were the same as those of the girl. If you continue to follow me, I will be overwhelmed with shame. If I were to yield to your request, I would be sorely blamed. Here again are two paths. You take one, and I will take the other. Do not refer to me as your husband any longer. You are no more my wife. Goodbye."

Despite Maha-Janaka's exhortations, Sivali stubbornly continued to follow him.

As they approached a deep forest, Maha-Janaka plucked a stalk of munja grass from beside the road. "Sivali," he said, holding up the stalk of grass, "just as this stalk cannot be reconnected to its root, so our lives can never be rejoined."

Hearing this and seeing the broken grass, Sivali, at last, understood that her relationship with Maha-Janaka had indeed come to an end. Unable to control her grief, she fell senseless on the road. Maha-Janaka quickly plunged into the forest, carefully obliterating his footsteps as he went. The ministers hurried to the prostrate queen, sprinkled her with water, and rubbed her hands and feet. When she regained consciousness, she asked weakly, "Where is the king?"

"Your Highness, we have no idea!" they replied. "We last saw him talking with you."

She ordered them to search for the king, but no one could find a trace of him.

Sadly, the queen turned back. As she returned to the capital, she erected five cetiyas—one at the place where she had last seen Maha-Janaka, a second at the place where he had talked with the fletcher, a third at the place where he had talked with the girl, a fourth at the place where he had eaten the meat, and a fifth at the place where he had met Narada and Migajina. At each cetiya, she paid her respects with flowers and incense.

When she reached Mithila, she summoned her son and performed his coronation in the mango grove of the royal park. Then she had the new king mount the royal elephant and, surrounded by the army, return to the city. She herself stayed in the park and became an ascetic. She practiced meditation, achieved jhana, and was reborn in the Brahma heavens.

Maha-Janaka entered the Himavat and, within seven days, perfected the five extraordinary powers and the eight jhanas, never again to return to the habitation of men.

Having concluded his story, the Buddha added, "This is not the first time that the Tathagata made a great renunciation." Then he identified the birth: "At that time, Uppalavanna was Manimekhala, Sariputta was Narada, Moggallana was Migajina, Khema was the girl, Ananda was the fletcher, Rahula's mother was Queen Sivali, Rahula was Prince Dighavu, my parents were King Arittha-Janaka and the queen, and I was King Maha-Janaka, who became an ascetic."

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