

Crossing the Wilderness

Apannaka Jātaka¹



While the Buddha was staying at Jetavana Monastery near Sāvatthī, the wealthy merchant, Anāthapindika, went one day to pay his respects. His servants carried masses of flowers and huge quantities of incense, cloths, robes, and catumadhu. Anathapindika paid his respects to the Buddha, presented the offerings he had brought, and sat down in a proper place.² At that time,

Anāthapindika was accompanied by five hundred friends who were followers of other teachers. His friends paid their respects to the Buddha and sat close to the merchant. The Buddha's face appeared like a full moon, and his body was surrounded by a radiant aura. Seated on the red stone seat, he was like a young lion roaring with a clear, noble voice as he taught the Dhamma full of sweetness and beautiful to the ear.

After hearing the Buddha's teaching, the five hundred gave up their false practices and took refuge in the Triple Gem. After that, they went regularly with Anathapindika to offer flowers and incense and to hear the teaching. They gave liberally, kept the precepts, and faithfully observed the Uposatha days. Soon after the Buddha left Sāvatthī to return to Rājagaha, however, these men abandoned their new faith and reverted to their previous beliefs.

Seven or eight months later, the Buddha returned to Jetavana. Again, Anāthapindika brought these friends to visit the Buddha. They paid their respects, but Anāthapindika explained that they had forsaken their refuge and had resumed their original practices.

The Buddha asked, "Is it true that you have abandoned refuge in the Triple Gem for refuge in other doctrines?" The Buddha's voice was incredibly clear because throughout myriad eons he had always spoken truthfully.³

¹According to the commentaries, this Jataka will be among the last to be forgotten when the Dhamma disappears from the world.

²When sitting with a respected person, one should not sit higher than, upwind from, directly in front of, directly behind, too far from, or too near that person.

³During his innumerable lives in quest of Buddhahood, a Bodhisatta can break all the moral precepts except abstaining from false speech.

When these men heard it, they were unable to conceal the truth. “Yes, Blessed One,” they confessed. “It is true.”

“Laymen,” the Buddha said, “nowhere between the lowest of hells below and the highest heaven above, nowhere in all the infinite worlds that stretch right and left, is there the equal, much less the superior, of a Buddha. Incalculable is the excellence which springs from obeying the precepts and from other virtuous conduct.”

Then he declared the virtues of the Triple Gem. “By taking refuge in the Triple Gem,” he told them, “one escapes from rebirth in states of suffering.” He further explained that meditation on the Triple Gem leads through the four stages of Enlightenment. “In forsaking such a refuge as this,” he admonished them, “you have certainly erred.

“In the past, too, men who foolishly mistook what was no refuge for a real refuge, met disaster. Actually, they fell prey to yakkhas in the wilderness and were utterly destroyed. In contrast, men who clung to the truth not only survived, but actually prospered in that same wilderness.”

Pressing his palms together and raising them to his forehead, Anāthapindika praised the Buddha and asked him to tell that story of the past. “In order to dispel the world’s ignorance and to conquer suffering,” the Buddha proclaimed, “I practiced the Ten Perfections for countless eons. Listen carefully, and I will speak.”

Having their full attention, the Buddha made clear, as though he were releasing the full moon from behind clouds, what rebirth had concealed from them.

Long, long ago, when Brahmadatta was reigning in Bārānasi, the Bodhisatta was born into a merchant’s family and grew up to be a wise businessman. At the same time, in the same city, there was another merchant, a very stupid fellow, with no common sense whatsoever.

One day, it so happened that the two merchants each loaded five hundred carts with costly wares of Bārānasi and prepared to leave in the same direction at exactly the same time. The wise merchant thought, “If this silly young fool travels with me and if our thousand carts stay together, it will be too much for the road. Finding wood and water for the men will be difficult, and there won’t be enough grass for the oxen. Either he or I must go first.”

“Look,” he said to the other merchant, “the two of us can’t travel together. Would you rather go first or follow after me?”

The foolish merchant thought, “There will be many advantages if I take the lead. I’ll get a road which is not yet cut up. My oxen will have the pick of the grass. My men will get the choicest wild herbs for curry. The water will be undisturbed. Best of all, I’ll be able to fix my own price for bartering my goods.” Considering all these advantages, he said, “I will go ahead of you, my friend.”

The wise merchant was pleased to hear this because he saw many advantages in following after. He reasoned, “Those carts going first will level the road where it is rough, and I’ll be able to travel along the road they have already smoothed. Their oxen will graze off the coarse old grass, and mine will pasture on the sweet young growth which will spring up in its place. My men will find fresh sweet herbs for curry where the old ones have been picked. Where there is no water, the first caravan will have to dig to supply themselves, and we’ll be able to drink at the wells they have dug. Haggling over prices is tiring work; he’ll do the work, and I will be able to barter my wares at prices he has already fixed.”

“Very well, my friend,” he said, “please go first.”

“I will,” said the foolish merchant, and he yoked his carts and set out. After a while, he came to the edge of a wilderness. He filled all of his huge water jars with fresh water before starting the sixty-yojana trek across the desert.

The yakkha who haunted that wilderness had been watching the caravan, and, when it reached the middle, he used his magic power to conjure up a lovely carriage drawn by pure white young bulls. With a retinue of a dozen disguised yakkhas carrying swords and shields, he rode along in his carriage like a mighty lord. His hair and clothes were wet, and he had a wreath of blue lotuses and white water lilies around his head. His attendants also were dripping wet and draped in garlands. Even the bulls’ hooves and carriage wheels were muddy.

Because the wind was blowing from the front, the merchant was riding at the head of his caravan to escape the dust. The yakkha drew his carriage beside the merchant’s and greeted him kindly. The merchant returned the greeting and moved his own carriage to one side to allow the carts to pass while he and the yakkha chatted.

“We are on our way from Bārānasi, sir,” explained the merchant. “I see that your men are all wet and muddy and that you have lotuses and water lilies. Did

it rain while you were on the road? Did you come across pools with lotuses and water lilies?"

"What do you mean?" the yakkha exclaimed. "Over there is the dark-green streak of a forest. Beyond that there is plenty of water. It is always raining there, and there are many lakes with lotuses and water lilies." Then, pretending to be interested in the merchant's business, he asked, "What do you have in these carts?"

"Expensive merchandise," answered the merchant.

"What is in this cart which seems so heavily laden?" the yakkha asked as the last cart rolled by.

"That's full of water."

"You were wise to carry water with you this far, but there is no need for it now, since water is so abundant ahead. You could travel much faster and lighter without those heavy jars. You'd be better off breaking them and throwing the water away. Well, good day," he said suddenly, as he turned his carriage. "We must be on our way. We have stopped too long already." He rode away quickly with his men. As soon as they were out of sight, they turned and made their way back to their own city.

The merchant was so foolish that he followed the yakkha's advice. He broke all the jars, without saving even a single cupful of water, and ordered the men to drive on quickly. Of course, they did not find any water, and they were soon exhausted from thirst. At sunset, they drew their carts into a circle and tethered the oxen to the wheels, but there was no water for the weary animals. Without water, the men could not cook any rice, either. They sank to the ground and fell asleep. As soon as night came, the yakkhas attacked, killing every single man and beast. The fiends devoured the flesh, leaving only the bones, and departed. Skeletons were strewn in every direction, but the five hundred carts stood with their loads untouched. Thus, the heedless young merchant was the sole cause of the destruction of the entire caravan.

The wise merchant allowed six weeks to pass after the foolish merchant had left before setting out with his five hundred carts. When he reached the edge of the wilderness, he filled his water jars. Then he assembled his men and announced, "Let not so much as a handful of water be used without my permission. Furthermore, there are poisonous plants in this wilderness. Do not eat

any leaf, flower, or fruit which you have never eaten before, without showing it to me first.” Having thus carefully warned his men, he led the caravan into the desert.

When they had reached the middle of the wilderness, the yakkha appeared on the path, just as before. The merchant noticed his red eyes and fearless manner and suspected something strange. “I know there is no water in this desert,” he said to himself. “Furthermore, this stranger casts no shadow.⁴ He must be a yakkha. He probably tricked the foolish merchant, but he doesn’t realize how clever I am.”

“Get out of here!” he shouted at the yakkha. “We are men of business. We do not throw away our water before we see where more is to come from!”

Without saying any more, the yakkha rode away.

As soon as the yakkhas had left, the merchant’s men approached their leader and said, “Sir, those men were wearing lotuses and water lilies on their heads. Their clothes and hair were wringing wet. They told us that up ahead there is a thick forest where it is always raining. Let us throw away our water so that we can proceed more quickly with lightened carts.”

The merchant ordered a halt and summoned all his men. “Has any man among you ever heard before today,” he asked, “that there was a lake or a pool in this wilderness?”

“No, sir,” they answered. “It’s known as the ‘Waterless Desert.’”

“We have just been told by some strangers that it is raining in the forest just ahead. How far does a rain-wind carry?”

“A yojana, sir.”

“Has any man here seen the top of even a single storm cloud?”

“No, sir.”

“How far off can you see a flash of lightning?”

“Four or five yojanas, sir.”

“Has any man here seen a flash of lightning?”

“No, sir.”

“How far off can a man hear a peal of thunder?”

“Two or three yojanas, sir.”

⁴A yakkha has no shadow because his body is only an apparition created to allow people to see him.

“Has any man here heard a peal of thunder?”

“No, sir.”

“Those were not men, but yakkhas,” the wise merchant told his men. “They are hoping that we will throw away our water. Then, when we are weak and faint, they will return to devour us. Since the young merchant who went before us was not a man of good sense, he was most likely fooled by the yakkhas. We may expect to find his carts standing just as they were first loaded. We will probably see them today. Press on with all possible speed,” he told his men, “but do not throw away a drop of water!”

Just as the merchant had predicted, his caravan soon came upon the five hundred carts with the skeletons of men and oxen scattered about. He ordered his men to arrange his carts in a fortified circle, to take care of the oxen, and to prepare an early supper for themselves. After the animals and men had all safely bedded down, the merchant and his foremen, swords in hand, stood guard all through the night.

Early the next morning, the merchant replaced his weakened carts with stronger ones and exchanged his common goods for the most costly of the abandoned merchandise. When he arrived at his destination, he was able to barter his stock of wares at two or three times their value. He returned to his own city without losing a single man out of all his company.

Having concluded his story, the Buddha said, “Thus it was, laymen, that, in times past, the foolish came to utter destruction, while those who clung to the truth escaped from the yakkhas’ hands. They went on to reach their destination safely, and safely they returned to their homes. Clinging to the truth not only endows happiness even up to rebirth in the Brahma heavens, but also leads ultimately to arahatship. Following untruth entails rebirth either in the four lower realms or in the lowest conditions of mankind.” After he taught the Dhamma, those five hundred disciples attained the first path.

Then the Buddha identified the birth: “At that time, Devadatta’s followers were the foolish merchant’s men, and Devadatta was the foolish merchant. My followers were the wise merchant’s men, and I was the wise merchant.”

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