

Jātaka Teachings 2026



Shantideva Center NY

Compiled and edited by Ven. Losang Gendun

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The Tigress¹

The compassion of the Buddha touches every living being. His perfect love, dispassionate and unlimited, resonates throughout all his former lives.

Before he became the Buddha, the Bodhisattva, in a series of lives too numerous to mention, through his wisdom blessed the world with countless demonstrations of his compassion, shown through giving, kind words, helpfulness, and consistency between words and deeds.

In one of his lifetimes, the Bodhisattva took birth in a family of brahmins which was renowned for purity of conduct and spiritual devotion. And as a result of merit earned in former lives, he found himself showered with wealth, distinction, and fame.

As a youth, the depth of his intellect was matched only by his eagerness to learn. He soon mastered the arts and sciences so well that the brahmins revered him as an authority dependable as the law itself; to the ksatriya warriors, he was as venerable as a king. To those thirsty for knowledge, he seemed a reservoir never empty; to ordinary people, he seemed a god.

But he did not delight in power or wealth or fame. His former actions and his constant reflection on the Dharma had purified his mind; he saw all too clearly the inevitable suffering that accompanies worldly pleasure, and the thought of renunciation was familiar to him. Without remorse, he shook off the householder's life as if it were an illness and moved to a forest retreat which became ornamented by his presence.

There, detached and tranquil, he radiated serenity. He affected even the worldly who were unattached to virtue, turning them away from their attachment to harmful activities. His wisdom and benevolence spread everywhere, softening even the hearts of the most ferocious animals, so that they ceased harming one another and began to live like ascetics themselves. By the power of his pure conduct, control of the senses, contentment, and compassion, the Bodhisattva, while not associating with worldly beings, yet showed love to all.

Since his desires were few, hypocrisy was unknown to him; glory, gain, and pleasure held no interest for him. He gladdened even the gods, who came to pay him homage. Hearing of his renunciation, his closest friends, who had been drawn to him by his virtues, left their families and joined him as disciples. He received them gladly and taught them what he could of good conduct, chastity, purification of the senses, mindfulness, detachment, meditation on loving kindness, and similar teachings.

¹ Cited with permission from Dharma Publishing from *The Marvelous Companion: Life Stories of the Buddha* by Aryasura.



His joyful existence attracted disciples with qualities similar to his own. And so, through his teachings, most of his numerous disciples gained extensive realizations and were established in virtue—the doors to lower states of being were closed, and the gates to happiness were opened wide.

One day, the Great Being, accompanied by his disciple Ajita, was walking up a mountain trail to a place well-suited for yogic practice. As they passed by a ravine concealed by shrubs, their contemplation was interrupted by the sound of fierce roaring.

The Bodhisattva peered over the edge of the trail into a yawning gulch far below and discerned the sunken eyes and emaciated body of a young tigress. It was clear she was exhausted and had not eaten for days due to the difficulty of giving birth. Maddened by hunger, she was beginning to eye her own offspring as food. The men watched as the thirsty cubs, fearless and trusting, approached their mother while she glared at them and growled as if they were the offspring of another.

Though composed in mind, the Bodhisattva, like a great tree shaken by an earthquake, was shaken by the sight of such suffering. So are the truly compassionate affected by the slightest suffering of others, though unmoved by great suffering of their own.

Out of the depth of his compassion, he lamented to his disciple: “Alas, behold the ferocity of self-love: a mother will feed on her young to satisfy her hunger! This, my friend, is the worthlessness of samsara. Who would foster self-love if he could see what it produced! Go quickly and find her some food, so that she will not harm her young ones and therefore also herself. I will try to divert her until you return.”

The disciple went off as he was told, not suspecting that the Bodhisattva had sent him away for an altogether different reason. For the Bodhisattva was thinking: “Why should I search for meat from the body of another when my own is at hand? Finding other meat is a matter of chance, and I would lose the opportunity to help. A body is frail, ungrateful, forever impure, and a source of suffering. How foolish not to rejoice at using it to benefit another.

“Two things alone cause people to ignore the grief of others: attachment to pleasure and inability to give aid. But I cannot feel pleasure while another being suffers, and if I have the power to help, how can I be indifferent?”

“Even if the one who was suffering had committed the greatest crime, I could not withhold my aid; my heart would burn with remorse as readily as dry shrubs catch fire. Thus, I will forestall this source of suffering by throwing myself over this cliff. My body will prevent the tigress from killing her young ones, and prevent the young ones from dying in the jaws of their mother.

“This act will encourage those who yearn to help the world, and set an example for those weak in effort. It will hearten those who understand the meaning of charity, and



will stimulate the minds of the virtuous. This act will disappoint the demons, gladden the friends of Buddha-qualities, and shame the selfish, the proud, and the lustful. It will inspire faith in the adherents of the Mahayana, and fill with wonder those who sneer at charity. At the same time, it will clear the way to the heavenly states of being for those who find joy in giving. I will fulfill my greatest aspiration—to benefit others by means of my own body—and so I shall approach great Enlightenment.

“Just as the sun banishes darkness and bestows light, so may this act banish sorrow from the world, generating happiness forever. I do not perform this action for glory or royal dignity, not even for supreme and everlasting bliss—it is for the benefit of all the world, that its joy will increase each time this story is told.”

And then, to the amazement of even the peace-loving gods, the Bodhisattva threw himself over the edge of the cliff, thus giving up his life. His body, in striking the ground, made a loud noise—and the startled tigress, forgetting her original intention, looked about her; seeing the Bodhisattva, she began to devour him.

Ajita soon returned empty-handed without having found any meat. He called for his teacher, but no answer came. Then his gaze fell to the chasm below, and he saw his teacher being eaten by the tigress. Sorrow and pain overwhelmed his heart, but the awe he felt at such extraordinary selflessness was even greater.

“How merciful the Great Being was to beings in distress, and how indifferent to his own welfare! How heroic and fearless his immense love! He has perfected the conduct of the virtuous and surpassed all others’ glory. His body, already precious for its virtue, has now been transformed into a vessel worthy of the highest veneration.

“How steadfast and tranquil was his mind, as firm as the earth, yet how moved by others’ sufferings! How imperfect my own mind appears next to his splendid act of heroism. In truth, beings need no longer suffer, for he is the Protector. With the strength of his renunciation, he conquers all suffering, and Mara, lord of desire, grows uneasy, dreading defeat. Let homage

be paid in every way to that Great Being: to his unrestrained and boundless goodness, for he is the refuge of all beings.”

In wonder at the Bodhisattva’s great action, the disciples joined with the gandharvas, the yakshas, the nagas, and the chiefs of the gods to cover the earth that held the treasure of the Bodhisattva’s bones with wreaths, bright cloths, jeweled ornaments, and sandalwood powder. Filling the air with songs of praise, they marvelled at the selfless act performed by the Bodhisattva.

In this story, we can see how the Buddha, even in his former births, showed his immense love for all sentient beings. Seeing this great love gives rise to the utmost



faith in him, and with this faith comes joy directed towards the Buddhas. In this way, faith is developed.

This account is also useful in explaining why we should listen carefully to the Teachings since the Dharma was attained through many difficult hardships. Inspired by an account such as this, one can praise the qualities of compassion that will lead to actions that benefit all beings.



The Noble Geese

Even when in distress, the virtuous display right conduct of a kind impossible for the nonvirtuous. How much more perfect their conduct must be when they are favored by fortune!

Once the Bodhisattva took birth as a king of the geese named Dhritarachtra, ruler of a vast flock living on Lake Manasa. Sumukha was his commander-in-chief, the protector of the king's hundreds of thousands of subjects. Only slightly less exalted than the king himself, Sumukha was well skilled in the management of the king's affairs, for he knew clearly what constitutes correct policy, and had a prodigious memory for events spanning vast extents of space and time.

Born of an illustrious family, Sumukha was endowed with constancy, honesty, and courage, his natural nobility embellished by talent, courtesy, and modesty. Distinguished by the purity of his conduct and mode of life, he was always vigilant, always clever, and his skill in management was faultless. Capable of enduring endless hardship, in military matters he was fearless, and he loved his king deeply. Sumukha was, indeed, a previous incarnation of the Buddha's disciple Ananda.

Together, the king of the geese and his commander instructed their flock like a teacher and his principal disciple, or like a father and his eldest son. As they taught the birds peaceful conduct and practices, their obvious mutual respect and affection caused their perfections to shine all the brighter. They were an example for all, and were admired by gods, nagas, yakshas, vidyadharas, holy men, ascetics, and many other beings.

As wings know no purpose but to support a bird in flight, so these two had no goal but to support the Dharma and to protect their flock. Thus favored, the flock gained great happiness and prosperity, just as men do when upheld by righteousness. Lake Manasa thus became a place of magical splendor. Massed together, the birds resembled an expanse of shimmering lotuses; in flight, they were like banks of clouds drifting across the sky. Their voices, clear and lovely, brought to mind the sound of the anklets of women dancing.

Enchanted by the wonderful virtues of the King of Geese –so intent on benefitting all beings—and by the glory of Sumukha, crowds of siddhas, rishis, vidyadharas, and gods gathered above the lake to extol their qualities: “Their majestic bodies are like pure gold, their speech is articulate and clear. Virtue rules their conduct and their policy. Though in outward form they are geese, their conduct indicates an identity far more exalted.”

Full of wonder, yet free from jealousy, the deities spread word of these two perfect geese throughout the world. The news reached even to the councils of kings—and Brahmadata, ruler of Varanasi, began to hear about the king of the geese and his



commander-in-chief from his trustworthy advisers and from the foremost brahmins. The king became increasingly curious about these two geese, and so he said to his ministers-of-state who were expert in many branches of science:

“Gentlemen! Now is the time to put your cleverness to the test. You must discover some way for me to catch at least a glimpse of these two most amazing geese.”

The ministers let their thoughts roam the paths of devious action, and in a short time they returned to their king with a suggestion:

“Your Majesty,” they said, “because all beings seek happiness, the promise of happiness is an irresistible lure. Therefore, in one of your forest glades, let Your Majesty build a beautiful lake like the one where the geese now reside. But let it surpass the brilliance of their Lake Manasa. If you loudly proclaim it a sanctuary for all birds, perhaps news of the beauty of the lake and its possibilities for pleasure will excite the curiosity of the geese and draw them near. Consider, Your Majesty: A pleasure once obtained loses its charm, but pleasures merely heard of are irresistible.”

The king accepted their proposal. Soon a great lake rivalling the magnificence of Lake Manasa was created in a park not far from the capital. A basin of purest water embracing a rainbow of flowers lotuses and waterlilies, white lotuses and red. Flowering trees, their leaves shimmering in the light, encircled the lake as if they had come to gaze upon it. Hovering over the surface was a swarm of bees attracted by the laughing lotuses rocking on the gently trembling waves. The kumuda flowers, opening at the gentle touch of the moonbeams, seemed like patches of moonshine piercing through the foliage. The pollen of the utpala blossoms ornamented the shore, as if drawn there by the finger-like waves. Like a painting made with golden lines, the leaves and filaments of the lotus flowers covered the shore with a golden sheen.

The calm transparent water revealed the contours of the many fish as clearly as if they were swimming through the sky. Elephants, dipping their trunks in the cloistered pools, blew forth cascades of spray like broken strings of pearls; the waves driven onto the rocks and scattered into the air seemed to dissolve in sparkling dust.

The pollen of the flowers, the musk of the elephants, and the sweet perfumes of goddesses scented the waters. So brilliant was the lake at night that the stars, the wives of the moon-god, gazed in the waters as in a mirror while myriad birds sang their sweet songs.

Such was the lake created by the king, and given by him to the birds for their sole use and pleasure.

In order to gain the birds’ trust, the king ordered a proclamation to be repeated day after day throughout the region: “This lake, covered with lotuses and waterlilies, has



been created solely for the enjoyment of the birds. The king guarantees their total safety.”

It was the time when autumn draws back a dark curtain of clouds and reveals a horizon clear and shining; a time when lakes with their brilliant water and clusters of lotuses are lovely to behold. It was a time when the moon is at its fullest, her rays sending forth their greatest power; a time when the earth is covered with the glory of harvest. It was a time when young birds feel the urge to wander. Soon the king’s lake was alive with the songs of thousands of birds, carefree and gay.

Not long after, a pair of geese from the Bodhisattva’s flock, in their autumn explorations, happened to fly over Brahmadata’s realm and spied the lake. They saw its shining and sweetscented lotuses open and glowing like flame; they saw its white lotuses, unfolding as if bubbling with laughter. They heard the echoing calls of many birds, the humming of the bees; they smelled the scent of the pollen scattered by the cool gentle breeze gliding over the waves. Although accustomed to Lake Manasa, the two geese were wholly captivated by the loveliness and splendor of this lake.

“Our whole flock must come here!” they thought (since we all generally think first of closest friends when we find some such pleasure). In order to enjoy themselves a while, they stayed at this lake near Varanasi until the next rains. Then, when armies of clouds advanced like hosts of the Daityas; when lightning began to flash like brandished weapons; when the festive troops of peacocks performed their dances, parading their fans and crying out as if exulting at the triumph of the clouds; when even smaller birds became loquacious; when brisk winds blew cool with the scent of the forest trees; when flocks of cranes were silhouetted against the sky like the teeth of dark clouds; at that time, when flocks of geese cried out softly, impatient, anxious, eager to move on, then it was that the two returned to their home on Lake Manasa. After paying respect to their king, they told of their travels: “South of Mount Himavat, Your Majesty,” they said, “in a place called Varanasi, a human king named Brahmadata has bequeathed to the birds a lake of marvelous beauty, filled with the most indescribable delights. All the birds can enjoy themselves there as fearlessly as if they were at home. Once the rains are over, Your Majesty should travel there.”

On hearing about the lake, the whole flock of geese grew eager to see it, but the Bodhisattva fixed an inquiring gaze on Sumukha, his commander-in-chief, and asked: “What do you think of this, O my commander?”

Sumukha bowed his head and replied: “I think it unwise for Your Majesty to go. What reason is there to leave our bountiful home? We have everything we need here. The delights described are nothing but temptation.

“Moreover, human hearts are false, and the compassion they proclaim is deceitful—under the guise of sweet words, men conceal a cruel nature. Birds and beasts express their true feelings in their calls; men are the only animals who produce sounds with



meaning contrary to their intentions. My lord: Men's words may seem wholesome and full of good intention, but remember that merchants spend money only in hope of future gain. By relying on men's words, we will surely come to harm. No matter what they say, we must be very careful.

“But should the lure prove irresistible, let us not stay long—let us resolve beforehand simply to go to the lake, enjoy its beauty, and return in short order. Such is my advice.”

As it happened, the flock of geese could not restrain their curiosity. Again and again, they pleaded with the Bodhisattva to set out for the lake, until finally, one bright autumn night, under the purest rays of moon and stars, the king of geese complied with their request. Accompanied by Sumukha and all the other geese, he set out like a moon-god attended by white autumn clouds.

As soon as the flock beheld the splendor of the lake, they were overwhelmed with wonder and gladness. And so they glided gracefully to its surface, where their beautiful forms added to the brilliance of the lake. Their delight soared as they wandered over its waters—as we would wander through a park, delighting in its great variety. And there upon the lake the geese heard the king's proclamation of safety, and witnessed the freedom of the birds already living there. Soon they forgot Lake Manasa entirely.

The guardians of the lake quickly reported the geese's appearance to the king: “Your Majesty, two of the most perfect geese have appeared at the lake; they must be the ones of which we have heard, such are their qualities. They are surrounded by a retinue of thousands, and their wings shine like gold; their beaks and feet shine even brighter. They are of great size, and beautifully formed. No other birds could be as beautiful.”

At once the king ordered his most skilled fowler, a man renowned for his expertise in snaring birds, to trap the geese. Promising to do so, the fowler carefully surveyed all the places where the two were most frequently seen. Then, while the rest of the flock wandered over the lake, cheerful and free and trusting, the trapper set strong snares well-concealed.

In no time at all the king of the geese was caught by the foot in a trap. Such is the perniciousness of misplaced trust: Aroused by the subtle machinations of those who falsely inspire confidence, it dispels all thought of danger, breeding carelessness and lack of awareness.

For fear a similar misfortune might befall the others, the Bodhisattva issued a special cry, warning the geese of danger.

In an instant, alarmed at the capture of their lord, the geese, shrieking discordant noises like soldiers whose chief warrior has been captured, flew into the sky wildly, without any regard for each other.



But a heart bound by love does not notice imminent peril: Sumukha, commander-in-chief, did not move from the side of his king. To such a one, sorrow aroused by the distress of a friend is worse than death.

“Go quickly, Sumukha,” said the Bodhisattva. “It is not wise to linger. How can you be of any help to me while I am in this state? Consider your own life.”

Sumukha replied: “If I were to leave, I would still be bound by old age and death—but if I stay, no final death can ensnare me. I have always attended you in prosperity, my lord. How could I leave you in calamity? If I were to abandon you for the sake of such a small thing as my life, where would I find shelter from the rain of blame? How could I leave you in your distress? Whatever fate befalls you, I will gladly share it.”

“What fate awaits a bird ensnared but the kitchen?” asked the Bodhisattva. “How can that prospect tempt one who is in free possession of body and mind? What profit do you see for me or for yourself, or for our flock in both our deaths? One might sooner distinguish level and unlevel ground in the dark than find the gain in such a course of conduct. What benefit, what profit in your death?”

Sumukha replied: “How is it, O king of birds, that you cannot perceive the profit in following the path of right action? Honoring the Dharma always reaps the greatest gain. Knowing the great benefit of the Dharma, I see great good for myself. And so I do not cling to life.” “Truly,” replied the Bodhisattva, “such is the Dharma of the virtuous, that a dutiful friend will never abandon a friend in distress, even at the cost of his life. You have observed the law of right action well. But grant me this last request, and fly away. It is your duty, O wise one, to fill the gap I leave.”

And so the two of them were expressing their mutual affection when the fowler, Nishada, burst upon them, rushing forth like the lord of death. When the geese saw him coming, they fell silent. Having watched the flock as they flew away, the fowler had suspected some were caught, and was dashing from trap to trap in search of his prey. Upon discovering the two geese, he gazed upon them, enthralled by their beauty. Thinking the two were caught, he reached down and shook the snares. But when he realized only one was trapped, the other loose and free, his astonishment multiplied. Approaching Sumukha, he spoke:

“That bird is caught, its freedom lost. He cannot fly, though I approach. But you have not been ensnared; you are free to go! Your wings are under your own power! Why did you not fly up into the sky as I approached? ”

In human language distinct and clear, its beauty showing the firmness and virtuous nature of the speaker, Sumukha replied: “You ask why I do not leave although I am able to fly? The answer is simple. You may have gained power over this great bird by means of your trap— and caused him great suffering by ensnaring his feet. But his power over me is stronger still: He has ensnared my heart with his virtues.”



Awestruck, the hairs on his body standing on end, Nishada asked once more: “What is this bird to you that you stay by him? All the others, in great fear of me, flew straight into the sky and left him.”

Sumukha answered: “He is my king, my friend, my benefactor, and I love him no less than life itself. He is in great danger. And so I will never leave him, even to save my life.”

Observing a feeling of wonder and admiration growing in the fowler, Sumukha continued: “Now, dear friend, if only our talk might have a happy ending. What glory you would win in setting us free!”

“I wish you no harm,” said the fowler. “It is not you I have caught. Why don’t you just fly away and join your kin? How happy they will be to see you!”

But Sumukha did not move. “If you truly wish me no sorrow, then grant me this request: Take me and let him go. Our bodies are of equal size, our age the same. If you are content to capture only one bird, taking me will cost you nothing.

“Think this over well! Wouldn’t you like to have me for your very own? Tie me up first, if you wish, and then release the king. By granting my request at no loss to yourself, you will gain the undying friendship of the whole flock. Set their lord at liberty, that they may once more see him shining like a moon in the clear sky.”

The fowler, accustomed to a cruel trade, was hard-hearted by nature. But he was deeply touched by Sumukha’s clear expression of selfless love and gratitude—spoken in a tone so sweet but firm. Overcome with admiration and respect, he joined his palms and bowed to

Sumukha, saying: “Well said, well said, O Noble One! Even in the realm of gods and men such selflessness—to give up one’s life for another—is most rare. I will pay you homage and set your king free. Who could harm one who is dearer to you than your life?”

And so the fowler, listening more closely to the voice of compassion than to the orders of his sovereign, released the king of the geese from the snare. Seeing his king set free, Sumukha fixed a look of love on the fowler, and said: “By releasing the king of geese, you have made all of us who are your friends eternally grateful! May you be blessed with beneficent friends for thousands of years! But for the present, so that your labor will not have been in vain, come take us both on your shoulder pole, free and unbound, and carry us to the palace to present to your king. When he sees the king of the geese and his commander-in-chief, he will no doubt be so pleased that he will shower you with more riches than you ever dreamed of.”



Thinking that the king at all events should see this wonderful pair of geese, the fowler agreed to the request. Placing the birds in baskets, unbound and unharmed, he delivered them to the king.

“May it please Your Majesty to accept this wondrous gift,” he said. “Here is the famous king of the geese and his commander-in-chief.”

The king gasped in amazement and pleasure at the sight of the two geese gleaming like two pieces of new-minted gold. “How did you manage to capture them unhurt and untied? Why do they willingly stay in the hands of one on foot when they are able to fly away?”

The fowler bowed to the king and related his miraculous tale: “Upon arriving at the lake, I set many cruel snares in pools and ponds, at the places where the geese tended to gather. Proceeding unsuspectingly, this foremost of geese caught his foot in a hidden snare. The other, though free, stood steadfast by his side when I arrived, and in a hum an voice articulate and sweet, pleaded with me to take him instead—in ransom for the life of his king. His plea, springing from his readiness to sacrifice his own life, carried great power.

“The effect of his soft words and great actions on behalf of his master was so great that I was converted to respect; and so I freed his lord, binding instead my own cruel temper. Rejoicing at the release of his king, the other addressed many thanks and blessings to me. In gratitude, he instructed me to carry them both to you so that my labors should not go unrewarded. Thus he has arrived at your palace of his own accord, together with his master. These two, though they have the form of birds, possess the nature of Dharma masters.”

These words filled the king with joy and wonder. He gave the sovereign goose a golden throne spread with a costly cover, soft cushions at its back, its headrest covered with lustrous jewels, a throne well-suited to a king. For Sumukha, he offered a throne of bamboo, one fit for a chief minister. Then the Bodhisattva, considering the time appropriate for speech, addressed the king in a voice that rang like a bell:

“I hope you are in good health, O health-deserving prince, and that your glorious body glows with strength. I hope your other body bides as well—the one comprising your virtues. Does it often breathe forth the breath of spiritual words and discourses? Have you dedicated yourself to those in need and to the task of protecting your subjects? Do you justly administer rewards and punishments, increasing both your own glory and your people’s affections? Do you encourage your people’s welfare?

“Have you the assistance of honest and devoted ministers who are devoted to the welfare of your people and skilled in management? I hope you attend to all these matters well?



“Do you set free the impulse of compassion when your vassal-kings plead for mercy—yet all the while refrain from falling into that insidious sleep of carelessness, unthinking trust? Do the virtuous applaud your efforts to secure the Dharma, and is your fame increasing? Do your enemies have but sighs to hurt them?”

The king answered all these questions in the affirmative, his pleasure showing his calm and tranquil ways. “Now having met with your holiness,” he added, “my joy and welfare are complete in all respects. For I have long wished to meet with you. But this fowler who captured you in his snare did you no harm, I hope, with his pain-inflicting stick? It so often happens that knaves are excited to sinful action when birds fall as their prey.”

The Bodhisattva replied: “I did not suffer, O great king, nor did the fowler treat me in any way like an enemy. Seeing Sumukha resolute by my side, seeing him stay by my side out of love for me though not caught himself, your fowler was amazed and addressed me with great kindness. After releasing me from the snare, he showed me both respect and honor. For this reason Sumukha asked him to bring us here, wishing him only good. May our arrival signal his great happiness!”

“Having shown such kindness to you, this fowler deserves a high reward,” the king replied. “I have longed for the sight of you, and I bid you both welcome. You are indeed a feast for my eyes.” And so the king showered Nishada with fabulous wealth, after which he again addressed the king of geese: “This whole realm is yours—pray put aside all formalities and tell me how I may serve you. My riches are at your disposal. Desires of friends frankly expressed give more pleasure than wealth itself; honesty among friends is a great virtue.”

Then the king, wishing to converse openly with Sumukha, gazed with admiration on that noble face, and said: “But perhaps, as a new acquaintance, you feel such openness is not quite suitable. Still, we may at least speak as equals, and with words not unsweet. I hope that you will favor me with conversation. Grant me the gift of your friendship, and increase the joy in my heart.”

On this invitation, Sumukha, commander-in-chief of the geese, bowed respectfully to the human king and replied: “A conversation with Your Highness who is the equal of Indra is a great joy indeed. Who would not feel grateful for such an opportunity? But would it not have been outrageous insolence for a mere attendant to interrupt the dialogue of two great kings? Such behavior is not for the well-bred. Therefore, great prince, I was silent. I ask your pardon, if you will grant it.”

The king smiled warmly. “Justly does the world delight in the greatness of your virtue. Justly has the king of geese made you his friend. Modest behavior such as yours is displayed only by those who have subdued their inner self. I hope with all my heart that this friendship now begun will never be broken. Indeed, the meeting of the virtuous always leads to friendship.”



The Bodhisattva, understanding the strength of the king's love and desire for friendship, replied: "Following your most generous impulse, you have treated us both as your dearest friends, though we have just met. Whose heart would not be won, illustrious prince, by such treatment? No matter what you may later ask of us, no one can dispute that here and now you have demonstrated the essence of hospitality.

"But this is no wonder for one who has subdued the self, one who cares only for the interest of his subjects, one who is as firmly intent on asceticism and contemplation as a Muni. You had only to follow the promptings of your nature to become a storehouse of virtues.

"Virtue is the source of the satisfaction which comes from such praise as I have now given you. In the strongholds of vice no bliss endures. Knowing this, what sentient being would ever resort to the wrong path?

"Military might, strength of wealth, successful policy; none of these will carry a prince to the heights he may obtain simply by walking the path of virtue. Virtue is accompanied by even such joy as attends Indra, the king of gods. Virtues alone are the wellspring of humility, the source of glory. Increasing like the moon, lovelier than moonlight, virtues appease the ferocious, the jealous, the angry, and the proud no matter how deeply their selfishness is rooted in hatred. The magnificence of sovereignty rests upon virtue alone.

"O sovereign, instill the love of virtue in your people. Set them an example by the unparalleled splendor of your modesty, for the people love to imitate their leaders. The first concern of a king is the good of his subjects—the path leading to virtue brings bliss in both this world and the next.

"Rule with love for the Dharma, and may the lord of the gods watch over you always. But now, O King, though your presence erases the sorrows of all who remain near, we must leave you. The sorrow of our fellow geese draws us to them."

The king approved the words of the Bodhisattva, and dismissed the holy geese with words both honorable and kind. Followed by Sumukha, as if by his reflected image, the Bodhisattva rose into the sky—which was as dark-blue as a spotless sword blade—and soon rejoined his flock. And all who saw him were filled with utmost joy.

Some time later, together with his flock, the king of geese, his heart completely filled with compassion for his neighbor, once more visited the king to discourse more fully on the Dharma. And the king, with head respectfully bowed, honored him in return.

From this story one can see how the virtuous, even when fallen into the state of animals, will behave in a manner which the impious can never hope to imitate. What can one say of the acts of the virtuous when favored by fortune? This account is also relevant when praising the qualities of spiritual friends—to show how one with such a friend can be



successful even in the most difficult circumstance. This account also exemplifies the fact that Ananda was a companion to the Buddha in many previous births, sharing the vicissitudes of the Bodhisattva, cherishing him with affection and veneration for a long time.



Ajastya the Ascetic

As generosity is such a great ornament even to ascetics, how wonderful it is when displayed by householders!

Once when the Buddha was still a Bodhisattva travelling through samsara for the good of the world, he was born as the child of an illustrious brahman family whose purity of conduct was an ornament for the earth. As the full and spotless autumn moon beautifies the heavens, so did the birth of Ajastya enhance the luster of his family. In due time, after he had obtained the sacraments called for by the sacred texts and traditions, and after he had studied the Vedas and their many rituals, fame of his knowledge spread far and wide.

The offerings he received from charitable lovers of virtue swiftly multiplied into considerable wealth. And, in turn, as an expansive cloud showers the fields, he regaled with treasures his relations and friends, beggars, guests, and teachers—the distressed as well as those worthy of honor. And so the bright glory of his learning, augmented by his generosity, shone forth all the greater, just as the beauty of the moon increases in autumn.

Yet the Great-minded One realized that the state of a householder is a source of sorrow, affording little comfort. A householder must involve himself in countless activities which lead to indiscretions and even greater difficulties. Turmoil surrounds the gaining of a fortune and the necessity of guarding it; struck by suffering's hundreds of arrows, one slowly becomes careless in spiritual affairs, until tranquility is destroyed.

Having grown weary of all that surrounds a householder's life, Ajastya knew that renunciation of the world would bring him freedom from such evils, and provide true happiness. The life of denial, so favorable to spiritual needs, was the only proper vehicle for spiritual development and liberation. And so, although wealth had brought him high regard, he cast it away as if it were a straw and gave himself over to the restraint and discipline of the world-renouncing ascetics.

But even after he had left his worldly life, many still sought him out for guidance; both those who had heard of him, as well as those who remembered him from before—all visited him out of respect for his virtues and tranquility. He found this contact with householders distracting and an obstacle to the detachment he desired. So, hoping for solitude, Ajastya moved to the island of Kara in the Southern Ocean.

Ajastya built his hermitage on Kara, an island encircled by white-flecked waves as blue as sapphire. The beaches were covered by the whitest of sands; the island was adorned by trees laden with flowers and fruit, and there was a lake of pure sweet water close to where he lived. In his hermitage he manifested ascetic practices and showed their glory by the emaciation of his body—he was like the crescent moon in the sky, which refines



great loveliness to an ever smaller size. Seeing his tranquility, attested to by his modest actions, even the wild beasts and birds of the forest understood that this man, absorbed in his vows and practice, was a Muni. And in their own way they strove to imitate his ways.

While living in this ascetic's grove, the Great Being continued to honor any guests who chanced to come his way. He would offer them roots and fruits gathered from the forest, fresh water, and words of welcome and blessing; he would then partake only of whatever food was left over, limiting his meals to what would barely sustain his body.

The glory of his great asceticism spread everywhere, reaching even the ears of Shakra, Lord of the Gods, who in his joy upon hearing of such virtue, desired to prove the constancy of the ascetic. To do so he made most of the roots and fruit disappear from that part of the forest. But the Bodhisattva, absorbed as he was in meditation, was insensible to the pangs of hunger; he was accustomed to being content with little, and was indifferent toward his body and

his food. He was therefore unconcerned. Boiling a few leaves in water, he satisfied his body's needs without the slightest discontent. Calm as ever, he proceeded with his simple life. Indeed, those who have few needs find sustenance easy to obtain: Where are grass and leaves and ponds not to be found?

Shakra, Lord of the Gods, was amazed at the Bodhisattva's behavior, and his regard for him grew even greater, but still he decided on another trial. Like a summer wind Shakra stripped every leaf from every tree, shrub, and bush in that grove. But Ajastya merely picked the freshest of the fallen leaves from the ground, boiled them in water, and lived on the thin soup without a moment's discomfort. Enjoying the happiness of meditation, he might have been feeding on ambrosia. For truly, modesty in the learned, detachment in the wealthy, and contentment in ascetics are the greatest of their treasures.

Now the Bodhisattva's astonishing constancy prompted Shakra, almost as if he were angry, to go one step further. Assuming the shape of a hungry and thirsty brahman, Shakra appeared before Ajastya at the time deemed most propitious for guests, the time when prayers and offerings are made just before the main meal. The Bodhisattva, his face the picture of happiness, joyously went to greet his guest. Speaking kind words of welcome, he invited him to partake of a meal. With gentle words soothing to both mind and sense, Ajastya offered his guest all the boiled leaves he had gone to so much trouble to procure; he himself was satisfied to feast on joy alone. Then, leaving his guest, he retired to his modest meditation hut, and passed the day and night in an ecstasy of joy.

In the same manner, Shakra reappeared at the same time the next day, and the next, and the next, and the next. And each day Ajastya received his guest with still more joy;



no suffering, not even peril to life, can compel the virtuous to renounce their love of giving, which is fostered by the practice of deep compassion.

Shakra, overcome with astonishment, knew that by such constant ascetic practice the

Bodhisattva could easily gain possession of Shakra's own brilliant god-realm: All he need do was ask. Anxious and fearful, Shakra cast aside his mask of humanity and assumed the wonderful beauty of his celestial shape. Appearing before the Great Being, he questioned him:

"What do you hope to gain by giving up your beloved family, your household and possessions, all that brought you such great happiness? No trifling motive could make a wise man give up his happiness and wealth and afflict his family with grief by leaving them for a life of toilsome asceticism. Please, if you will, satisfy my curiosity and reveal the qualities to which you are so intently dedicated."

The Bodhisattva replied: "Listen, sir, to what I strive for. Repeated births lead to repeated sorrow, as do those fearful plagues of old age and illness; the inevitability of death is a great disturbance to the mind. I am living like this so that I might become a refuge for all sentient beings!"

Shakra, Lord of the Gods, realizing that his celestial abode was safe from the Bodhisattva's intent, was much relieved. "Well said!" he exclaimed, pleased by the Bodhisattva's well expressed statement of purpose. "Ascetic, for this fine pronouncement I grant you whatever you wish. Ask what you will."

The Bodhisattva, not wishing for anything connected with the pleasures of existence (indeed, finding painful the very act of asking, for he was truly contented), replied to Shakra: "If you wish to grant me what will truly please me, grant me this: May that fire of discontent which burns in the hearts of people the world over—even after they have won spouse, children, power, and riches beyond their wildest dreams— may that inexhaustible and all-consuming fire never enter my heart!"

The total contentment implied by this wish delighted Shakra. Praising the Bodhisattva, he urged him to make a second wish. Ajastya, in order to demonstrate how difficult it is to be rid entirely of the fettering passions, preached the Teaching once more under the guise of a request: "Your qualities are truly great, O Master of the gods, if you can grant me this great gift: May hatred, which is like a conquering enemy army, destroying wealth, position, and reputation, always remain far distant from me!"

On hearing this reply, Shakra was even more delighted. "Justly does Fame, like a faithful lover, attend those who have renounced the world. For this wish so aptly phrased, please accept another gift from me."



And so the Bodhisattva, under the guise of accepting the bequest, because of his aversion to the fettering passions and the company of those afflicted by emotionality, asked: “May I never hear a fool, see a fool, speak to a fool, or endure the annoyance and pain of being in the company of a fool! For this I ask.”

“What is this?” cried Shakra. “Anyone in distress is surely deserving of help from the virtuous. And ignorance is at the root of all suffering. How is it that you, the most compassionate of ascetics, could dislike the sight of a fool, one who is most in need of compassion?”

The Bodhisattva answered: “Because, friend, there is no help for a fool. Consider: If a fool could be helped, would I withhold anything that would benefit him? But a fool gains nothing whatsoever from my help. Burning with the fire of conceit, thinking himself wise, practicing wrong conduct as if it were right, he urges his neighbors to do the same. Unaccustomed to upright conduct and lacking in moral training, he becomes angry even when admonished for his own benefit, and is provoked by whoever wishes him well. Does there exist anyone in the world who can be of help to such a fool? For this reason, O most excellent of gods, I wish I did not even have to look at a fool! Because there is no help for a fool, he is a most unfit object for my efforts.”

Shakra praised the ascetic again, saying: “The priceless jewels of your words cannot be suitably rewarded. But please accept another boon as if it were a handful of flowers, an offering of respect.”

The Bodhisattva replied in words meant to demonstrate the happiness which comes from virtue: “May I obtain good judgment, hear only the wise, and dwell only with the steadfast. O Shakra, may I spend my days happily conversing with the judicious! May you grant me this wish!”

“You seem to be quite a partisan for the wise!” commented Shakra. “Tell me, what have they done for you? Why do you show such desire for even the sight of the wise?”

The Bodhisattva, in order to show Shakra the qualities of the virtuous, replied: “Listen, friend, to my reasons for desiring the sight of the wise. The wise walk in the path of virtue, and inspire others to join them. Words said for their good, even if harsh, never arouse their impatience, for they are adorned with the self-discipline of honesty and integrity. One can benefit such people. For this reason I admit a bias toward those with wisdom.”

“Well put!” said Shakra. “Surely by now you have obtained everything you could ask for, wholly contented as you already are. Yet please accept one more gift, if only to gratify me. A favor offered from reverence, from abundance of power, and with the hope of bringing benefit becomes a source of great pain if not accepted.”



Observing Shakra's deep desire to help and wishing to please and benefit him, and wishing also to show him the benefits of giving, the Bodhisattva answered: "Your food always free from corruption and decay, your mind made lovely by the practice of charity, and your followers adorned with the purity of their conduct—may you grant me these!"

"You are a jewel-mine of wisdom," said Shakra. "Not only shall everything you wish be granted, but because your answers have been so beautifully spoken, I shall grant you one more request."

"If you will be so kind as to grant me the highest favor, O most excellent of the gods," the Bodhisattva replied, "grant me this, O conqueror of Asuras: Visit me no more in your blazing splendor!"

Highly astonished, and somewhat offended, Shakra replied: "Do not say such things, dear sir. By every manner of ritual, every kind of prayer and vow, sacrifice and penance, people all over the world seek the sight of me. Yet you do not desire it! For what reason? I came only to grant your every wish!"

"Do not scold me, Master of Gods," said Ajastya. "I wish only to please you. Neither for lack of courtesy do I ask, nor for lack of honor or reverence toward Your Majesty. But your superhuman shape blazes with extraordinary brilliance even while shining gently, and I fear contemplating such a marvel might cause a lapse in adherence to spiritual duties."

Then Shakra bowed to the Bodhisattva, circumambulated him from left to right, and disappeared on the spot. And at daybreak Ajastya was feasted with divine food and drink brought to him by Shakra, who invited hundreds of Pratyekabuddhas and thousands of devaputras as well.

All this was seen by the Bodhisattva. Bountiful offerings were made, and the Muni obtained a joy most sublime. He continued to delight in a life suitable for ascetics and abided in meditation and utmost tranquillity.

From this story one can see how the heroic practice of giving is an ornament even in ascetics, and is also greatly needed in householders. It also shows why men should adorn themselves with heroic and steadfast giving. This account may be told when blaming covetousness, hatred, infatuation, and foolishness; when preaching on the virtue of the spiritual friend, or on contentment. This story is likewise appropriate when speaking of the magnanimity of the Tathagata, and of the wonderful discourses given by the Bhagavat in his previous existences—if he was, even then, an inexhaustible jewel mine of excellent sayings, what can be said of the Buddha after having attained perfection?



The Monkey King

Those who walk the path of virtue can win over the hearts of even their fiercest enemies.

In the heart of the Snow Mountains is a blessed region. Watered by mountain currents clear as crystal, its soil is finely carpeted with herbs of healing powers. Hundreds of forest trees display an extraordinary variety of fruit and flowers, and throngs of birds fill the air with song.

In that forest the Bodhisattva lived as a monkey king. But even in that bestial form, his mind was formed by the constant practice of giving and compassion; depending on such friends as these, jealousy, selfishness, and cruelty would have nothing to do with him.

The monkey lived in a banyan tree, so tall that it seemed the lord of the forest. Like a mountain peak, it seemed to touch the sky; its thick, deep foliage was like a mass of clouds. Its long branches arched under the weight of large fruit, sweet and fragrant, and of a lovely bright color.

Now it so happened that one branch of this fruit tree hung over a river. The Bodhisattva, in his wisdom, told his troop of monkeys: “You must always prevent this one branch from bearing fruit; the day it does, none of you will taste the fruit of this tree again.” And so they took great care that this should not happen. For so it is that the virtuous, though fallen into the realm of animals, often retain a vestige of good fortune which they invariably use to increase the happiness of their comrades, just as humans care for close relations.

But then it happened that the monkeys overlooked one young and not very big fruit, hidden in the cavity of a leaf which had been curled up by ants. As that fruit developed, so did its fine color and aroma, its flavor and softness. Finally, when it had fully ripened and its stalk had loosened, it fell into the river and floated downstream, to where a king was accustomed to swim in the river with his harem.

There the fruit stopped, caught in the top of a net which marked the boundaries of a pond. And there the fruit rested, its aroma drifting through the air, overpowering all other odors. The sweet liquors, the flower garlands, the perfumes of the bathing women—none had a fragrance so alluring as this fruit. The women breathed deeply with half-closed eyes, intoxicated by the aroma. They cast their eyes about to find the source, looking curiously in all directions. When, at last they caught sight of the fruit trapped in the net, they could not keep their eyes from it. Even the king was curious to know its nature. He had the fruit brought to him, and, after having his physicians examine it, tasted it himself.



Its marvelous flavor provoked the king's amazement as powerfully as a spectacle provokes the gasps of a crowd. Just as its color and smell had stirred his senses, now its flavor filled him with desire. Accustomed to the finest delicacies, the king became intent on storing an endless supply of this wonderful fruit.

"If one cannot enjoy such fruit, what benefit truly accrues from royalty?" he thought. "One who obtains such fruit is surely a king, and this without exercising royal power."

Having decided to find the source of the fruit, he thought: "Most likely the tree that bore it is not too far away, and must stand on the riverside. That fruit could not have been in the water for long, for it kept its color, smell, and flavor, and showed no trace of damage. It should not be hard to find."

Desiring to taste that flavor again, the king ceased his sport in the river. After having quickly secured the safety and order of his capital, he set out for the forest, surrounded by a large body of armed men. Up the river they marched, clearing their way through thickets haunted by wild beasts and passing through woodlands of great natural beauty, enjoying the rich experiences of the forest, frightening elephants and deer with the sound of their drums. Finally they reached the vicinity of the tree they sought, until then unseen by human eyes.

From a distance the foliage of the lord of trees appeared to be like a mass of clouds heavy with water, hanging low over the peak of a mountain; the other trees surrounding it looked as if they were nobles surrounding their sovereign.

An aroma more fragrant than that of ripe mangoes wafted from the tree toward the army as if bidding it welcome. The king at once knew this was the tree he sought. Then, as he came closer, he saw hundreds of monkeys running among the tree's boughs and branches, devouring the fruit. Fury arose in him toward the creatures for robbing him of what he so craved, and he ordered his men to attack. "Beat them off! Get rid of them!" he cried harshly. "Drive them away, destroy them all, the scoundrels!"

The warriors strung their bows with arrows, all the while uttering loud cries to frighten away the monkeys. Some of the men picked up stones and sticks and spears and rushed at the tree as if attacking a hostile fortress.

The Bodhisattva, however, had heard the tumultuous approach of the royal army, for it moved with the uproar of a sea assaulted by violent winds. He saw the attack being made on all sides of his wonderful tree, saw the arrows, spears, stones, and sticks flying like showers of thunderbolts. And he beheld his monkeys, unable to do anything but shriek discordant cries of fear while looking up to him, their faces pale with terror and dismay.

Unafraid, unperturbed, overcome by compassion, the monkey king reassured his group. Then, intent on their rescue, he climbed swiftly to the top of the tree, and in one giant



leap, flew to the hilltop nearby. It would have taken any other monkey many jumps to reach that spot, but the heroic one crossed it in a single bound, as if he were a bird: He jumped as if he flew. Compassion produced his strong determination, but heroism gave him strength and carried it to perfection. By the earnestness of his effort, he found the way to do it in his mind.

Once on the mountain slope, he found a bamboo cane, tall, strong, and deeply-rooted, longer than the distance between the hill and the tree. Fastening its top to his feet, but leaving the root in the earth, he jumped back to his home. The distance was great, and with his feet so encumbered, the Great Being barely succeeded in seizing the nearest branch with his hands. But holding fast, he managed, by using his utmost strength, to keep the cane stretched taut, a link between the tree and the hilltop. Then, urgently, he ordered the troupe of monkeys to evacuate the tree.

Desperate for safety and bewildered by fear, the monkeys wildly scrambled over the body of their king, escape their only thought. But though his limbs grew weak and numb, his mind remained firm.

Beholding this, the king and his men were overcome with astonishment. Such a splendid display of strength and wisdom, combined with such great self-denial and compassion for others, would amaze any who heard of it; imagine, then, the effect on those who witnessed it!

The king said to his men: “That magnificent monkey has maintained his position for far too long—he must be at the breaking point. His limbs are torn and bruised by the feet of the hordes of frightened monkeys escaping over his body. Surely he will be unable to extricate himself safely. Go, quickly, stretch a canopy underneath him; then shoot off the cane and the banyan branch simultaneously with your arrows.” And so it was done.

When the monkey fell, the king then ordered that he be gently lifted off the canopy and placed on a soft couch. There the monkey lay unconscious from pain and exhaustion. But after his wounds had been salved and lightly washed with butter and other medicinal ointments, he recovered his senses. The king approached, full of curiosity, admiration, and respect.

“You made a bridge for those monkeys with your own body, and rescued them without regard for your own life. What are you to them; what are they to you? If you consider me a person worthy of such confidence, pray tell me, foremost of monkeys. No small bonds of friendship could give one the strength to do such a deed.”

The Bodhisattva, in return for the king’s attempt to heal him, respectfully made himself known in the proper manner: “Those monkeys charged me with the task of being their ruler. And I, bound to them with the affection of a father for his children, accepted. They have always been quick to obey my orders. O mighty sovereign, such is the relationship between the other monkeys and myself. Rooted over time, it has



strengthened the natural ties of friendship which exist between animals of the same species. Dwelling together, we have strengthened our bonds to the mutual affection of kin.”

The king, tilled with wonder, spoke again: “Yet ministers and officials are meant to serve their lord, not the king to serve his servants. Why did Your Honor sacrifice yourself for mere attendants?”

The Bodhisattva replied: “Yours is the way of political expediency, Your Majesty, but to me such is a bad lore. I find I cannot overlook suffering, even if that suffering belongs to strangers. How much more difficult it is to overlook the sufferings of those who are as close to me as the closest relations, their minds intent on worshipping me!

“When I saw the monkeys in great danger and overwhelmed by distress and despair, a great sorrow swept over me, leaving me no room to think of myself. I saw the bows bent, I heard the dreadful noise of their strings. I saw the glittering arrows fly up on all sides. Swiftly and without a moment’s hesitation, I jumped to the hill. There, a wellrooted cane tied to my feet, I jumped once more, returning to my terrorized subjects, and reached out with my hands to grasp a branch which seemed to reach out to me.

“And while I lay stretched out between branch and reed, my comrades happily made their escape, running without hesitation over my body.” The king, wondering at the joy now emanating from the Great Being, questioned him again: “But what good have you obtained, spurning your own welfare and absorbing the disaster meant for others? ”

The Bodhisattva replied: “My body may be broken, O king, but my mind is totally sound, having saved from suffering those I ruled for so long. I bear these pains patiently just as conquering heroes wear their ornaments.

“Now I have repaid my followers for their reverence and affection, repaid them for the prosperity we shared. Bodily pain does not grieve me, nor separation from my friends. Destruction of my pleasure does not grieve me, nor does death, whose approach I welcome as one would the coming of a festival.

“Look what I have won by falling into this wretched state: satisfaction, serenity, fame, fearlessness of death, honor from a king, and approval from the virtuous. But a ruler who does not show compassion will never know such virtues: He will obtain their opposite. For if a ruler be devoid of virtue, if he has destroyed his good renown, if vice has taken up an abode in him, what can he expect in his future besides the fiery flames of hell? For this reason I have explained to you, O powerful Prince, the power of both virtue and vice. Rule, therefore, with right action, for Fortune has the fickle nature of a woman. Protect your kingdom with the Dharma.



“A king must try to provide happiness for all: the men and animals of his army, his officials, his subjects in both town and country, those without protector, brahmans and shramanas—each and all, as if he were their father.

“Acting in such a way a king will enjoy prosperity, and his merit, wealth, and glory will increase both in this world and the next. With such action as distinguished the holy kings of old, may you always show compassion to your people, and may you be illustrious and happy!”

After thus instructing the king, who listened with the devout attention of a pupil, the monkey king departed his broken body and ascended into the heaven realms.

From this story one can see how those who act with virtue win the respect of all, even of their enemies. How important it is for those wishing to gain the affection of men to follow the way of the virtuous! This account is also appropriate when praising the qualities of the Tathagata, and when explaining how most beings cannot even bring about their own benefit, while the Bhagavat can bring about the benefit of everyone. This story is also relevant when explaining the importance of listening with attention to the preaching of the Dharma, when praising the qualities of compassion, and also when instructing princes how kings must be merciful toward their subjects. This story is also told to demonstrate how the virtuous show their gratitude.

