

## “Feast for the Dead” Jātaka (*Matakabhatta-jātaka*, *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā* 18)

“If beings only knew...” The Teacher [the Buddha] spoke about the feast for the dead while was staying in the Jeta Grove. At that time, lots of people were having goats and sheep and so on killed and given as what is called a “feast for the dead” for the sake of their deceased relatives. Seeing what the people were doing, the monks asked the Teacher: “Sir, there are currently lots of people bringing about the death of living beings and having them given as what is called a ‘feast for the dead’. Can it be that this is of benefit, sir?”

The Teacher replied: “No, monks. There is no benefit at all in destroying living beings, even if it is done with the intention of providing a feast for the dead. The wise of former times, teaching the dhamma while seated in the sky, explained the danger of this activity, and all the inhabitants of Jambudipa abandoned it. But now, because they have been through multiple rebirths,<sup>1</sup> the practice has reappeared.” He spoke of the past:

In the past, when Brahmadata was ruling in Varanasi, there was a famous brahmin teacher who was well-versed in the three Vedas. Intending to give a feast for the dead, he had a goat caught and said to his pupils: “My dears, lead this goat to the river and wash it. Place a garland around its neck, give it the five-finger mark, and then bring it back.” “Very well,” they agreed, and they took it and went to the river, where they bathed it, adorned it, and placed it on the river bank.

Then that goat saw his own past kamma. Thinking, “Today I am going to be freed from the suffering of this existence!” he became happy, and bellowed out a great laugh like the smashing of a pot. Then thinking, “Having had me killed, this brahmin will get the same suffering<sup>2</sup> as I have had!” he began to feel compassion for the brahmin, and cried out very loudly. And the brahmin pupils asked: “Friend goat, you laughed and cried very loudly. Why did you laugh? And why did you cry?” “Ask me about this in the presence of your teacher!”

So they took him and went to explain to the teacher what had happened. The teacher listened to their words and asked the goat: “Goat, why did you laugh, and why did you cry?” The goat, understanding his own kamma through his memory of past-lives, said to the brahmin: “In former times, brahmin, I was a brahmin like you, a scholar of the mantras. Intending to give a feast for the dead I had a goat killed for that, and because of killing that one goat, for five hundred births minus one I have had my head chopped off. This rebirth is the last of the five hundred, and so today I will be freed from the suffering of this existence. Thinking this, I became happy and for this reason I laughed. But I cried

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<sup>1</sup> The process of dying and being reborn is usually understood to involve erasing memories. So, despite learning to avoid animal sacrifice in the past, beings forget what they understood previously.

<sup>2</sup> The term here is dukkha, suffering or unsatisfactoriness, the first of the four noble truths.

because although I, having had a single goat killed and suffered decapitation in five hundred births, am today freed from this suffering, this brahmin, having had me killed, will end up being decapitated in five hundred rebirths, just like me. Hence I cried out of compassion for you.”

“Do not fear, goat! I am not going to have you killed.” “Brahmin, what are you saying? Whether or not I am killed by you, it is not possible for me to escape death today.” “Do not fear, goat! I will wander with you to protect you.” “Brahmin, your protection is weak, and the evil I have done is very strong.”

The brahmin released the goat, and saying, “Let us not allow this goat to be killed by anyone!” he took his pupils and wandered with that goat. As soon as it was freed, the goat stretched out its neck towards a bush that had grown near the face of a rock, and began to eat the leaves. At that very moment, a bolt of lightning struck that rock face. A shard of rock was split off and fell on the goat’s outstretched neck, cutting off his head. The people gathered around.

At that time the Bodhisatta had been reborn as a tree-deity in that very place, and seeing all these people he used his divine powers to sit cross-legged in the sky. “If these beings understood the fruits of evil, surely they would never cause the death of a living being,” he thought. Explaining the dhamma with a sweet voice he spoke this verse:

“If beings only knew that this was the cause of a miserable rebirth,  
no being would kill another, for the killers lament.”

In this way the Great Being taught the dhamma, frightening them with the fear of hell. The people, hearing this dhamma teaching, were frightened of hell and stopped killing beings. The Bodhisatta, having taught the dhamma to the people and established them in virtue, passed on according to his kamma. The people were established in the Bodhisatta’s teachings: they gave gifts and made merit, and filled the city of the gods.

The Teacher, having finished this dhamma teaching, showed the connection and explained the rebirths: “At that time I was the tree-deity.”

Translated by Naomi Appleton, May 2020

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## Glossary

**Bodhisatta** (Sanskrit: Bodhisattva): An “awakening-being”, a person who will become a Buddha in the future. Here it refers to the Buddha (of our time) in a past life.

**brahmin:** A priest or religious teacher in the Vedic tradition that later became Hinduism.

**city of the gods:** A heavenly realm. As with the hells, rebirth in a heaven is long-lasting, but is ultimately a temporary state.

**dhamma:** The Truth, or a teaching that expresses the Truth. Usually dhamma is used to refer to the teaching of the Buddha, but here it is the teaching of the Bodhisatta.

**feast for the dead:** A ritual sacrifice that is believed to benefit the ancestors. Under the influence of Vedic rites, animal sacrifice played an important role in mediating between the living and the dead in early India.

**five-finger mark:** A magical mark made by dipping the hand in some liquid and then placing it with the five fingers spread out.

**Jambudipa:** ‘Rose-apple island’, the name given to the continent of India.

**Jātakatthavaṇṇanā:** A collection of 547 jatakas (stories of the past lives of the Buddha) preserved by the Theravada school of Buddhism in their scriptural language of Pali. Every story in this large jataka collection begins with a quotation from the first verse of the story. This is because the verses only (not the prose of the story) are considered to be the words of the Buddha, and so they have special canonical status. The opening passage tells of the circumstances for the Buddha (referred to as “the Teacher”) telling one of his past lives, and each story ends with an explanation of the people’s rebirths.

**Jeta Grove:** The location of a key early Buddhist monastery, gifted to the Buddha and his monks by a wealthy layperson.

**kamma** (Sanskrit: karma): This literally means action or deed, but particularly refers to actions that have results for the doer, often in future lifetimes.

**mantras:** The mantras are the sacred chants at the heart of Vedic ritual.

**tree-deity:** A minor god that inhabits trees. Like the gods that inhabit heaven realms, tree-deities are part of the cycle of rebirth (samsara).

**Vedas:** The scriptures at the heart of Vedic ritual practice, considered the founding scriptures of Hinduism.