

Brahmā Baka Sutta

The Discourse on the Brahmā Baka

[A High God has wrong view]

(Saṃyutta Nikāya 6.4/1:142-144)

Translated by Piya Tan ©2004

Introduction

1 The Brahmā Baka

The name **Baka** means “crane” or “heron” in Epic Sanskrit and Pāli. In Indian tradition, the crane is regarded as a bird of cunning and deceit. Since this is the Brahmā’s name, he probably reflects some of his namesake’s quality as evident in **the Brahmā Nimantanika Sutta** (M 49).¹ His past lives, however, were quite illustrious.

The Baka Brahma Jātaka (J 405) contains the same stanzas as those in the Brahmā Baka Sutta [6-10], mentioning a number of Baka’s past good deeds that brought him to be reborn as a Brahmā:

- (1) Once, on seeing a caravan in distress in a desert, he used his supernatural powers to redirect a river into the dry desert which saved the travellers. [9 = v575]
- (2) On another occasion, while he was staying on the bank of the river Enī, near a frontier village, he found the village being attacked by dacoits (bandits), whom he drove away by causing them to see the royal authorities approaching with him at the head [9 = v576].
- (3) An incensed naga once attacked some merry-makers in boats, but Baka assumed the form of a garuda² and frightened the naga away. [9 = v577].
- (4) The fourth incident mentioned above is related with more details in **the Kesava Jātaka** (J 346),³ which says that Baka was born into a kshatriya (noble) family, but he renounced the world as an ascetic named **Kesava**. The Bodhisattva, then known as Kappa, was Kesava’s pupil. [9 = v578]

The Commentaries—including **Baka Brahmā Jātaka** (J 405)—relate how Kesava, practising meditation, developed the fourth dhyana and was reborn in the Veha-p,phalā Brahmā world. At the end of his life-span there, he fell (*cavati*) into the third-dhyana Subhakiṇṇā world. Passing away from there, he was reborn in the second-dhyana Abhassarā Brahmā world (where the lifespan is eight aeons), and, later, falling into the first dhyana, he was reborn in the same world, but with a life-span of only a single aeon. Baka, while living in Ābhassarā, forgot that he had fallen from higher Brahmā planes and had been reborn there and that he had lapsed into wrong view.⁴

The Majjhima Commentary and its Porāṇa Ṭīkā say that the Brahmā Baka holds an eternalist view with regard to both his own personal individuality (*sakkāya*) and the world over which he lords.⁵ His claim that there is “no escape beyond” [4] is a rejection of the higher dhyana planes, the paths and fruits, and nirvana, none of which he even knows exists!

¹ See SD 11.7.

² In Buddhist mythology, the *nāga* is a spirit of the earth or water, when in physical form appears as a giant serpent, usually a cobra (and in Chinese mythology, evolved into the dragon, a spirit of the sky). The *garuḍa*, also called *supaṇṇa* or *suvaṇṇa*, is a spirit of the air and sky (similar to the harpies of Greek mythology). During the 6th week of the Great Awakening, it is said that the serpent-king (*nāga,rāja*) Mucalinda emerged from his subterranean abode and coiled around the meditating Buddha’s body seven times, spread his hood over him to shelter him from a violent storm that had arisen (V 1:2). The garuda is the naga’s mortal enemy and the naga’s greatest joy if to be free from attacks from the garuda (J 4:463). See

³ See next section.

⁴ J 405/3:359-363; MA 2:409; SA 1:208 f.

⁵ MA 2:409; MAṬ:Be 2:311.

2 Kesava Jātaka

The Kesava Jātaka (J 346)⁶ says that Baka was born into a kshatriya (noble) family, but he renounced the world as an ascetic named Kesava, who lived in Himavā (Himalayas) with five hundred pupils. The Bodhisattva, having been born as Kappa, a brahmin of Kāsī, joined him and became his senior pupil. When the ascetics went to Benares for salt and vinegar, the king lodged them in his park and fed them. When they returned to Himavā, the king persuaded Kesava to stay behind. Soon, Kesava fell ill out of loneliness, and the five royal physicians could not heal him. At his own request, he was taken to the Himavā by the king's minister, Nārada. On once again seeing his familiar haunts and his pupil Kappa, he immediately recovered, though his medicine was but a broth of wild rice.

The king of the Jātaka is identified as Ānanda, Nārada is Sāriputta, and Kesava, Baka Brahmā.

The story was related to Pasenadi. Having discovered that Anāthapiṇḍika daily fed five hundred monks in his house, the king gave orders that the same should be done in his palace. One day, he discovered that the monks would take the food from the palace, but would, after receiving their almsfood, eat it at another place where they are loved. When the king reported this to the Buddha, the Buddha pointed out to him that the best food was that which was given with love: love was the best flavouring for food (J 3:142-145, 3:362).

According to **the Dhammapada Commentary**, the king personally looked after the monks for seven days, after which he forgot about them and they were uncared for. So they stopped going to the palace (DhA 1:342 ff). The story of the past as given in the Dhammapada Commentary differs considerably from the Jātaka account. In the Dhammapada Commentary, Kesava is described as a king who had left the world and become an ascetic. The ascetics left the royal park, disliking the noise there, but they left Kappa with Kesava. Soon after, Kappa went away, and it was then that Kesava fell ill.

Kesava is identified with the Bodhisattva, Kappa with Ānanda, the king of Benares with Moggallāna, and Nārada with Sāriputta.

It was this reluctance of the Sākya monks to accept Pasenadi's hospitality which led him to seek an alliance through marrying a Sākya maiden; but the Sākyas gave him Vāsabhā Khattiyā, Mahānāma's daughter by an outcaste.⁷

3 Brahmā Nimantanika Sutta

This sutta relates the Buddha's visit to Baka in the Brahmā world and their ensuing conversation. Both the sutta openings [1] are identical, except that the former is set at Ukkatthā. The incidents of Baka's previous life are briefly referred to. The prose section of the sutta [1-5] is identical to **the Brahmā Nimantanika Sutta** (M 49),⁸ which however contains more dramatic details.

It is interesting to see that the Majjhima Reciters (*majjhima bhaṇakā*) set the Brahmā Baka story (the Brahmā Nimantanika Sutta, M 49) at Ukkatthā,⁹ while the Saṃyutta Reciters (*majjhima bhaṇakā*) give the setting of the Baka Brahmā Sutta as Jetavana, near Sāvattihī. While the Saṃyutta account is brief and related in the third person, the Majjhima sutta is put in the mouth of the Buddha himself as a more engaging first-person narration. The Brahmā Baka Sutta is most probably the core around which the Brahmā Nimantanika Sutta was built, or more likely, both accounts were based on a shorter urtext.

4 How wrong view arose in the Brahmā Baka

Both **the Brahmā Nimantanika Sutta** (M49), its Commentary (MA 2:409) and the Saṃyutta Commentary to the Baka Brahmā Sutta (SA 1:208-212) give an interesting account of how the Brahmā Baka falls into wrong view. While the Sutta briefly recounts it, the Commentaries give a more detailed account. In an earlier human birth, Baka had developed the dhyanas and was reborn in the Vaha-p,phalā

⁶ J 346/3:141-145.

⁷ See SD 10.8 Introd (7).

⁸ See SD 11.7.

⁹ See **Brahmā Nimantanika S** (M 49) = SD 11.7 Introd (2).

(Abundant Fruit) Brahmā world, a fourth-dhyana plane with a life-span of 500 aeons (world-cycles). After that, he was reborn in the Subha,kiṇṇā or Subha,kiṇhā (Resplendent Glory) Brahmā world, a third-dhyana plane with a life-span of 64 aeons.

When he fell from there, he was reborn in the Ābhassarā (Streaming Radiance) Brahmā plane, a second-dhyana with a life-span of 8 aeons. Thereafter, he was reborn in the lowest of the first-dhyana Brahmā planes with a life-span of only one aeon. At first, he knew his own past karma and planes of rebirth, but as time passed, he forgot both and lapsed into an eternalist view (M 49.10/1:329). It is during this time, that the Buddha visits the Brahmā Baka and corrects his wrong view.

5 Aparā,ditthi Sutta

There is another **Brahmā Sutta** mentioned in the Thera,gāthā Commentary and quoted there in full (ThaA 3:175 f). It is said that once when the Buddha is staying at Jetavana, a certain Brahmā conceives the view that no monk or recluse could come to his world. The Buddha, aware of this, goes to that Brahmā world and stands mid-air enveloped in flames. He is followed by Moggallāna, Mahā Kassapa, Mahā Kappina and Anuruddha, each standing at one of the cardinal points: east, south, west and north respectively. Moggallāna then asks Brahmā if he still holds the same view, to which he replies that he no longer thinks that he is eternal. This particular episode very likely identifies the Brahmā of this story as the Brahmā Baka.

When the Buddha and the arhats have left, Brahmā sends one of his retinue to Moggallāna to find out if there are other disciples of the Buddha as mighty as he. Moggallāna's answer is that there are many such saints. The sutta is actually **the Aparā,ditthi Sutta** (S 6.5/1:144-146), which follows immediately after the Brahmā Baka Sutta.

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The Discourse to the Brahmā Baka

(S 6.4/1:142-144)

1 [142] Thus have I heard.¹⁰

At one time the Blessed One was staying in Anātha,piṇḍika's Park in Jeta,vana [Prince Jeta's Grove], near Sāvathī.

The Brahmā Baka's wrong view

2 Now at the time, this evil wrong view had arisen in the Brahmā Baka, thus:

"This [Brahmā realm]¹¹ is permanent; this is everlasting; this is eternal; this is everything [complete in itself]; this is not subject to passing away, nor is this born, nor does it decay, nor die, nor pass away (from the heavens), nor reappear; and there is also no escape beyond this."¹²

3 The Blessed One, having known with his mind the thought in the Brahmā Baka's mind, just as a strong man would stretch his bent arm or would bend his stretched arm, vanished from Jeta,vana, and reappeared in the Brahma world.

4 The Brahmā Baka saw the Blessed One coming in the distance. Seeing the Blessed One, he said this (to him):

"Come, good sir! Welcome, good sir! It has been a long time since the good sir has gone out of his way [taken the trouble] to come here."¹³

THE BRAHMĀ'S ETERNALIST VIEW. Now, good sir, this [Brahmā world] is permanent; this is everlasting; this is eternal; this is everything [complete in itself]; this is not subject to passing away, nor is this born, nor does it decay, nor die, nor pass away (from the heavens), nor reappear; and there is also no escape beyond this."

5 When this was said, the Blessed One said this to the Brahmā Baka:

"Alas! The worthy Brahmā Baka has fallen into ignorance¹⁴ in that he says
of the impermanent that it is permanent;
of the non-everlasting that it is everlasting;
of the non-eternal that it is eternal; [142]
of the incomplete that it is everything;
of what is subject to passing away as being not subject to passing away;
of where one is born and decays and dies and passes away (from the heavens) and reappears, that this is where one is not subject to passing away, nor is born, nor decays, nor dies, nor passes away (from the heavens), nor reappears;
and when there is an escape beyond this, he say that there is no escape beyond this."

¹⁰ This sutta opening is the same as that of **Brahmā Nimantanika S** (M 49), except that the latter is set at Ukkatthā. See Introd (3) above.

¹¹ MA 2:405: "This" refers to *Brahma-t,thāna*.

¹² *Idam niccam idam dhuvam idam sassatam idam kevalam idam acavana,dhammam, idam hi na jāyati na jīyati na mīyati na cavati na upapajjati, ito ca pan'aññam uttarim nissaraṇam n'atthi ti*. Comy gives an account of why he holds this wrong view: see Introd (4) above.

¹³ "Come, good sir!...to come here" *ehi kho marisā, sāgataṃ marisā,cirassam kho marisā imam pariyāyam akāsi yadidam idh'āgamanāya*, which is cold formality. In **Udumbarikā Sīha,nāda S** (D 25), the wanderer Nigrodha says, *etu kho bhante Bhagavā sagataṃ bhante Bhagavato...*, "Please come, venerable Blessed One! Welcome to the Blessed One!" using the 3rd imp sg *etu* ("Let ...come!") as a polite formality (D 25.7a/ 3:39): so too in **Poṭṭhapāda S** (D 9.5/1:179). This is stock: D 1:90, 179, 2:270, 3:2, 39; M 1:252, 326, 481, 2:2, 30, 3:7; S 1:142; U 13.

¹⁴ "Fallen into ignorance," *avijjāgato*, alt tr "steeped in ignorance" (M:H 1:389).

Jātaka stanzas¹⁵

[The Brahmā Baka:]

- 6 Because of seventy-two meritorious deeds, Gotama,¹⁶
Now we are lords of power, gone beyond birth and decay.
This, knowledge-master, is our final Brahmā birth.¹⁷
Many are the people who long for us.¹⁸ 572

[The Buddha:]

- 7 Short is the life-span here, not long at all,
That you, Baka, think is long—
I know it, O Brahmā, to be but
A hundred thousand *nirabbudas*.¹⁹ 573

[The Brahmā Baka:]

- 8 “I am the one of infinite vision,” (so you say), Blessed One,
“Who has overcome birth and decay and sorrow.”
What was my ancient devotion to virtue and vow?²⁰
Tell me this so that I might understand. 574

[The Buddha:]

- 9 You gave drink to many people
Who were thirsty, oppressed by the heat²¹—
That was your ancient devotion to virtue and vow,
That I recollect as if just awakening.²² 575

¹⁵ The ensuing stanzas are all found in **Kesava J** (J 405/3:359-363).

¹⁶ *Dva, sattati Gotama puñña, kammā*. Bhikkhu Bodhi in tr this pāda (line) follows the SA (paraphrased): “Master Gotama, we seventy-two men of meritorious karma [SAPt: ie, doers of meritorious deeds] have been reborn here through that meritorious karma (*bho Gotama mayam dvā, sattati janā puñña, kammā* [SAPt: *puñña, kārino*] *tena puñña, kammāna idha nibbattā*.)” I have kept to the Pali text which clearly makes good sense on its own.

¹⁷ Bhikkhu Bodhi reads **brahma, patti** in pāda c following Ee2 (PTS ed 1998) rather than *brahm’uppatti* or *brahm’upapatti* as in the other eds: “This, knowledge-master, is our final attainment of Brahmā.” I have kept to the Pali text.

¹⁸ *Asmābhi jappanti janā anekā ti*. Comy however has the reading *abhijappanti* with *patthenti pihenti*, “yearn for, desire for” (SA 1:209). **Baka Brahma J** (J 405) has 3 verbs: “Many people, with their hands joined in reverence, yearn for us, desire us (*namassanti patthenti pihayanti*), saying “He is the Lord Brahmā, Mahā Brahmā, and so forth. They wish, ‘Oh, that we too might become thus!’” (J 405/3:359). It should be noted that being reborn as a Brahmā is a Buddhist teaching. The ancient brahminical belief was that the faithful are only reborn in “companionship” (*sahavyatā*) with Brahmā, ie, in his heaven: see eg **Dhānañjāni S** (M 97.31/2:195 = SD 4.9; see also D 1:118, 2:206; M 3:199; S 4:306; A 3:192). As such, here, “Many are the people who long for us” refers to those faithful who desire for rebirth in Brahmā’s presence (as a God-believer today would desire to be reborn in God’s presence).

¹⁹ *Nirabbuda*. SA explains the time measurements as follows: 1 *koṭī* = 10 million years (10^7 years); a *koṭi* of *koṭī* = *pakoṭi* (10^{14} years); a *koṭi* of *pakoṭi* = *koṭi, pakoṭi* (10^{21} years); a *koṭi* of *koṭi, pakoṭi* = *nahuta* (10^{28} years); a *koṭi* of *nahutā* = *ninnahuta* (10^{35} years); a *koṭi* of *ninnahutā* = *abbuda* (10^{42} years); 20 *abbudā* = 1 *nirabbuda* (10^{840} years). SA says that here the duration refers to the remainder of Baka’s life-span (SA 1:209; J 3:360). [I thank Melvyn Sim Soon Suan, National University of Singapore mathematician, for his assistance here, and who remarks that these numbers are astronomically too huge to be of any “mathematical use.”]

²⁰ Comy glosses *vata, sīla, vattan ti vuccati sīlam eva*, “It is moral virtue itself that is called ‘devotion to virtue and vow’” (SA 1:209 f). SAPt: “It is a vow (*vata, bhūtam*) because it is formally undertaken, and a practice of virtuous conduct, but the two terms actually refer to one thing. Thus the commentator says, ‘It is virtue itself.’” (SAPt:Be 1:243)

²¹ Comy says that, using his psychic powers, he diverted a river in to the desert, and so saved the thirsty travelers. (SA 1:211)

When people were seized at Eṇī,kula [Antelope Bank],
 You released these captives who were being led away²³—
 That was your ancient devotion to virtue and vow,
 That I recollect as if just awakening. 576

When a ship was seized on the Ganges currents,
 By a fierce naga, craving for human flesh,
 By your power you subdued it, freeing the ship²⁴—
 That was your ancient devotion to virtue and vow,
 That I recollect as if just awakening. [144] 577

And I was your apprentice,²⁵ Kappa.
 Whom you thought to be wise²⁶—
 That was your ancient devotion to virtue and vow,
 That I recollect as if just awakening.²⁷ 578

[The Brahmā Baka:]

10 Surely you know this life-span of mine:
 The others, too, you know—thus you are the Buddha!
 Thus this blazing majesty of yours
 Shines and remains in the Brahmā world! 579

—evaṃ—

v1.23a
 050311; rev 060221

²² Comy gives detailed accounts behind each of the incidents referred to in vv 575-577. See also DPPN 2:259 f. Bodhi notes: “Malalasekera errs, however, in stating that all the incidents occurred during the incarnation as Kesava. It seems [SA] ascribes v 578 alone to the life as Kesava.” (S:B 436 n390).

²³ Comy: When a frontier village near Eṇī,kula was attacked by dacoits, he projected a vision of royal authorities approaching headed by himself to rescue the village. (SA 1:211)

²⁴ Comy: An incensed naga attacked some merry-makers in boats, but he assumed the form of a garuda and frightened the naga away. (SA 1:211)

²⁵ “Apprentice,” *baddha,cara*, which Comy glosses as *antevasika* (SA 1:212). See S:B 412 n268.

²⁶ *Sambuddhivantaṃ va ti nam amaññim* (PTS). Bodhi reads the verb here as *amaññi*—or *amañña* (Ee 1998)—as against *amaññim*, “I thought” (Ce PTS): “Though [SA] takes the line to mean that Kappa thought thus of his teacher, I follow the Jātaka, in which the teacher Kesava esteems his pupil Kappa as intelligent and devout while Kesava himself appears almost maudlin.” (S:B 436 n391). I follow Bodhi here.

²⁷ This stanza (and only this) refers to **Kesava J** (J 346; cf DhA 1:342-344). See also DPPN 2:259 f. Bodhi notes: “Malalasekera errs, however, in stating that all the incidents occurred during the incarnation as Kesava. It seems [SA] ascribes v 578 alone to the life as Kesava.” (S:B 436 n390).