

Mūla,pariyāya Jātaka
Birth-story on the Root Teaching
[How conceit prevents awakening]
(Jātaka 245/2:259-262)
Translated by Piya Tan ©2003

Preamble

1 “Time devours all beings” (*kālo ghasati bhūtan ti*). This story was told by the Teacher while he was staying in the Subhaga Grove near Ukkaṭṭhā in connection with the Mūla,pariyāya Sutta.

At that time, it is said, 500 brahmins, masters of the Three Vedas, went forth for the sake of the Teaching. Having mastered the Tipiṭaka [Three Baskets of Texts], they were intoxicated with conceit, thinking,

“The Fully Self-awakened One knows the Tipiṭaka; we too know the Tipiṭaka. So what is the difference between us?”

They ceased to wait upon the Buddha and conducted themselves against him.

2 One day, when they were seated before him, he expounded the Mūla,pariyāya Sutta adorned with the eight stages of knowledge.¹ They did not understand a word. Then they thought:

“Here we had the conceit to think that there is none as wise as we are. Truly there is none wiser than the Buddha. O the excellent virtues of the Buddha!”

Then they were humbled like serpents with their fangs extracted.

3 When the Teacher had stayed as long as he wished in Ukkaṭṭhā, he left for Vesālī. When he reached the Gotamaka Shrine, he expounded the Gotamaka Sutta. The ten-thousand world-systems trembled. Listening to it, the monks attained Arhathood.

4 At the end of the Mūla,pariyāya Sutta, while the Teacher was staying at Ukkaṭṭhā [260] the monks discussed the matter in the Dharma-hall:

“Brothers! How great is the Buddha’s power. These brahmins who have gone forth were intoxicated with conceit were humbled by the teaching of the Mūla,pariyāya by the Blessed One.”

5 The Teacher arrived and asked,

“What, monks, were you all discussing here seated together?”

They told him regarding the matter of their discussion.

6 “Monks, this is not the first time that I have humbled them who used to hold their heads so high with conceit. I have done the same in the past.”

The Story of the Past

1 Long ago when Brahma,datta was ruling in Benares, the Bodhisattva was born into a brahmin family. When he came of age, he mastered the Three Vedas [along with their invocations and rituals; phonology and etymology; and the Iti,hāsa Purāṇas² as the fifth; and well versed in materialistic philosophy and the marks of the Great Man].³ He became a teacher well known far and wide, instructing 500 brahmin youths in the sacred mantras.

2 These 500 [being clever] put in their best efforts in the arts. [The brahmin, too, did not have the closed fist of some teachers, but taught them every branch of knowledge as if pouring water into a jar, telling them: “This branch of knowledge lead to such and such welfare in this life and in the next]. In time, when they completed their learning, they thought:

¹ “The eight stages of knowledge,” *aṭṭha bhūmi*, that is, the 8 main sections of the Sutta, beginning with that on the “ordinary person” and ending with the “Tathāgata”.

² Iti,hāsa Purāṇas are the oral tradition of brahminical legends of kings and sages.

³ Additional materials from the Majjhima Commentary are put within [square brackets].

“We know as much as the teacher: there is no difference. [We too can now be teachers!]”

Conceited and stubborn, they did not go before the teacher and failed to perform their duties and chores.

3 One day, they saw the teacher sitting under a jujube tree. Wishing to mock the teacher, they tapped the jujube tree with their finger-nails.

“A worthless tree!” they said.

4 The Bodhisattva, noticing that his pupils were mocking him, [thought, “I will cut down their conceit.” One day, when they came to attend to him, after they had saluted him and taken their seats, he] said,

“I will ask you a question.”

“Ask us. We will answer!” they laughed with delight [intoxicated with the pride of their learning].

5 The teacher asked the question by uttering the first stanza thus:

<p>190. Time devours all beings Together with everything, even itself! Now the being that devours time Burns the burner of beings.</p>	<p><i>kālo ghasati bhūtāni sabbān’ eva sah’attanā yo ca kāla,ghāso bhūto sa bhūta,paṇaṇiṃ paci</i></p>
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6 Having heard the question, not one amongst the youths were able to answer [and could only remain silent]. Then the Bodhisattva [dismissed them and] said:

“Do not think that this question is in the Three Vedas. You think that you know all that I know. Out of your conceit you make a jujube tree out of me. But you know that I know much that is not known to you. Leave me now! I give you seven days. During that time, think of an answer for the question!”⁴

7 Having saluted the Bodhisattva, each of them left for their own house, where for seven days they thought over the problem, making neither head nor tail of it.

8 On the seventh day, they came to the teacher, greeted him and sat down.

“What, Lucky Mouths, is the answer to the question?”

“We do not know,” they answered.

9 Then the Bodhisattva uttered the second stanza:

<p>191. Men have heads on their shoulders, And there soft hair grows, But their necks are bound— Where are those with ears?</p>	<p><i>bahūni nara,sīsāni lomasāni brahāni ca gīvāsu paṭimukkāni koci-d-ev’ettha kaṇṇavā</i></p>
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[Hearing this, the youths sat silent, dismayed, their shoulders drooping, hanging their heads, downcast, scratching the ground with their fingers.]

“You are fools—there are merely holes in your ears, but no wisdom!” he rebuked the youths, [“Learn then, dears, the solution to this question,”] and then answered the question. [262]

10 “Time” is the earlier part of the day and the later part of the day.

“Beings” are living beings. Time does not eat the skin and flesh of beings, but swallows and devours them by depriving them of life, beauty and strength, by crushing their youth and destroying their health.

“Together with everything, even itself”: thus devouring them, it does not omit anything and devours all. Not only does it devour all beings, but also itself. For the earlier part of the day does not remain when the later part arrives, and the later part of the day does not remain when the next day arrives.

“The being that devours time” is the Arhat, the one with cankers destroyed. He is called “the being who devours time” because he has “eaten up” time by destroying future rebirths.

⁴ MA 1:57: The teacher dismissed them, “Enough for today. Go, by tomorrow you should be able to answer it.” But even though ten and twenty of them tried to solve it together, still they were unable to make head or tail of the question. The next day they went to the teacher and said, “We cannot answer this question.”

“(He) burns the burner of beings”: it is craving that burns beings up in the suffering states. This craving the Arhat has burned up with the fire of knowledge and reduced them to ashes. As such, he is said to “burn the burner of beings”.

11 Having heard the answer, [the youths understood the question as clearly as the smooth and rough parts of a road lit up at night by the light of a thousand lamps, and] they said,

“ [As long as life lasts we will live under our teacher.] Great are our teachers! [We were so puffed up with conceit on account of learning that we did not even know the meaning of a four-line stanza.]”

Then they begged for his forgiveness, gave up their conceit and waited on the Bodhisattva, [and in the next life, they were reborn in heaven].

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Having given this Dharma discourse, the Teacher connected the Birth-story: “The 500 youths then were these monks; I myself was their teacher then. [Thus in the past, too, I humbled them when they were going about with their heads puffed up with conceit.]”

[Hearing this Jātaka, they thought, “In the past, too, we were knocked down because of conceit,” and became even more humble and devoted themselves even more to their individual meditation-subjects.]

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