

The devas and the asuras reconcile through marriage

Source: *Devāsura Saṅgāma Sutta* (A 9.39, SD 61.21), In our battle with Māra we are only safe with a liberated mind, © Piya Tan, 2024.¹

2.1.3.1 Sakra, in his past life as **Magha** (and his 33 friends), had 3 wives or mates (*pāda-paricārikā*) —Sudhammā, Nandā and Cittā—each of whom contributed some kind of social service in that life. **Sudhammā** skillfully supplied Magha and his friends with the proper timber they needed: the Sudhammā Hall was named after her. **Nandā** had a lake dug in the grounds of the rest-house built by Magha and his friends: this was the Nandā Lake. And **Cittā** had a flower garden planted near the rest-house: this was called Citta,atā in Tāvātimsa. When they died, they were each reborn in Tāvātimsa as Sakra’s wives again.²

Despite the constant battles between the devas and the asuras, we see a new development in their relationship as Sakra was reminded of the beauty and grace of **Sujā**, daughter of Vepacitti, one of the asura lords (*asur’inda*),³ and fell in love with her (through their past-life close connection). The story of Sakra’s quest for **Sujā** is by far the most dramatic of his love affairs. It was a marriage that unified Sakra’s family with that of Sujā’s, that is, of the Vepacitti and the asuras, and ended the asura-deva war.

2.1.3.2 Like Sakra’s associations with Sudhammā, with Nandā and with Cittā, his connections with Sujā went back to their past lives, too. Thus, when Magha was born as Sakra, he looked for Sujā, and found that she had been reborn as a crane in a mountain cave. He went to her and exhorted her to keep the 5 precepts. She did so, eating only fish that had recently died a natural death.

A few days later, she died and was reborn as a potter’s daughter in Benares. Again, Sakra sought her in the city, and knowing that she had been keeping the precepts, gave her and her family a cartload of treasures. When she died, she was reborn as Sujā, the daughter of Vepacitti, the asura chief.

2.1.3.3 Because of **Sujā**’s great beauty, her father Vepacitti granted her the boon of choosing her own husband. On the groom-choosing day, Sakra disguised himself as an old asura—“old enough to be her grandfather”—and joined the crowd. Noticing Sakra, Sujā at once recognized him and threw the wedding garland at him. He took Sujā by her hand; “I am Sakra!” he announced and flew into the air.

The asuras gave chase but Mātali, Sakra’s celestial charioteer, came in the chariot, Vejayanta, and drove them away to Tāvātimsa with the asuras hot on their heels. A dramatic turnaround occurred that made the asuras flee from Sakra!

¹ <http://www.themindingcentre.org/dharmafarer/wp-content/uploads/61.21-Devasura-Sangama-S-a9.39-piya.pdf>

² Their stories are in the closing section of **Magha Vatthu** (DhA 2.7b/1:274-280), SD 54.22. See also SD 54.8 (6.3).

³ The lords of chiefs amongst the asuras were Vepacitti, Rāhu and Pahārāda (AA 4:106); of them all, Vepacitti was seniormost (*sabba,jettḥaka*) (SA 1:342).

2.1.3.4 As Sakra, Sujā and Mātali rumbled through the sky, they raced close over a forest of silk-cotton trees with the nests of garuda nestlings.⁴ The helpless nestlings began to panic and cry out. Sakra heard them, and on learning that they feared being crushed by his chariot, at once instructed Mātali to turn back.

Sakra would rather surrender to the asuras than make these helpless nestlings nestless! That was his thought at the moment. When the asuras, from the distance, saw Sakra's chariot turning around, they thought that reinforcements had arrived for him, and they retreated without as much as looking back!⁵ This beautiful story is preserved in **the Magha Vatthu** (DhA 2.7) and in greater detail in **the Kulāvaka Jātaka** (J 31).⁶

2.1.3.5 Sakra took the asura maiden Sujā to Tāvātimsa and installed her at the head of 25 koṭis⁷ of apsaras (celestial nymphs). One day, Sujā asked Sakra for a boon, saying, "Maharajah, in this deva-world, I have neither mother nor father nor brother nor sister; therefore, pray take me wherever you go." "Very well," said Sakra. Unlike Sakra's other wives (Sudhammā, Nandā and Cittā) who made various contributions to Sakra's works, it seemed that Sujā did nothing except to spend her time beautifying herself. As we shall soon see, she was more than merely a cosmetic addition to Sakra's life.

Meantime, Sakra posted a guard to defend the nagas (dragons) living in the ocean below, and likewise guarded the suparṇas (harpies) and the kumbhaṇḍhas (orcs) and the yakshas, and likewise to the 4 great kings.⁸ And as a special precaution, Sakra placed a statue of himself as Indra wielding a thunderbolt at each of the city gates. Seeing this life-like image, the approaching asuras cry out, "Sakra has made a sally!" and fled.⁹

Again, we may see all this as a fascinating mythical story. However, in closing **the Magha Vatthu**, the Buddha reminds us that this is about how the youth Magha kept to the path of heedfulness by which he gained great sovereignty and came to rule over the 2 deva worlds, Tāvātimsa and the Cātum, mahārājika (the realms of the 4 great kings).¹⁰ "It is through

⁴ Garuda (P *garuḷa*; Skt *garuḍa*) is a golden-winged bird (like the phoenix of Western mythology), mortal enemy of nāgas and snakes which they devour. Their wingspan is immense and can stir up a storm, such as in **Sussandī J** (J 360). In northern Buddhism, they are amongst the 8 classes of nonhumans who serve as armies (*aṣṭha, senā*) of the gods, ie: *deva, nāga, yakṣa, gandharva, asura, garuḍa, kimnara* (birdman or centaur), and *mahorāga* (giant serpent-spirits).

⁵ DhA 2.7,94-97/1:279 (SD 54.22).

⁶ J 31/1:198-206 (SD 86.23).

⁷ Traditionally, a *koṭi* is 10 million, a crore. On numerical hyperbole, see SD 52.1 (8.2.3.1). See P Hoodboy, "An Indian history of numbers," *Nature* 459 2009:646 f.

⁸ *Cātum, mahā, rājika* is eponymous heaven of "the 4 great kings" (*cattāro mahā, rājāno*) who dwell in the 4 quarters of Tāvātimsa: Dhātaraṭṭha and the gandharvas (*gandhabba*) (east), Virūḷhaka and the kumbhaṇḍas (south), Virūpakka and the nāgas (west), and Vessavaṇa and the yakshas (*yakkha*) (north). (D 2:207 f, 3:194 f). Besides the gandharvas, etc, Sakra appointed a 5th, the suparṇas (*supaṇṇa*, VvA 9) or garuḍa (*garuḷa*, J 1:204), as the 5th guardians of the realm.

⁹ Thus Dh Comy relates Sakra's marriage to **Sujā**, daughter of **Vepacitti**, one of the asura chiefs, who thus became Sakra's father-in-law (DhA 1:278 f; cf J 1:205 f). Buddhaghosa explains that in those days, father-in-law (*śasura*) and son-in-law (*jāmāta*) sometimes battled with one another (SA 1:345)! See also SD 54.21 (1.2.2.1).

¹⁰ These 2 deva-worlds are the lowest of the heavens and the closest to earth; they are regarded as the "earthbound" (*bhumma, bhūta*) heavens and thus closely involved with the human world (like in Greek mythology): SD 54.3a (3.5.1); SD 60.8 (1.1.1.2).

heedfulness, too, that all attain higher knowledge, both of this world and that transcends this world.”

So saying, the Buddha pronounced the following verse:

<i>appamādena maghavā</i>	By heedfulness Maghavā
<i>devānaṃ seṭṭhataṃ gato</i>	gained lordship over the gods.
<i>appamādaṃ pasaṃsanti</i>	They praise heedfulness;
<i>paṃādo garahito sadā ti</i>	heedlessness is always blamed.

Dh 30

(DhA 2.7), SD 54.2

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