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Bodhi Rāja,kumāra Vatthu

The Story of Prince Bodhi | DhA 12.1 (Dh 157)

Theme: We should guard our actions during childhood, youth and maturity

Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2019

1 Summary and Sources

1.1 SUMMARIES

1.1.1 Story summary (and significance). The **Bodhi Rāja,kumāra Vatthu** highlights that we should guard well our actions throughout our life, during childhood, youth and maturity, especially by respecting life. The secondary theme is that we should be accountable for our karma by not repeating unwholesome acts, and by keeping the mind thoroughly wholesome. All of us have done bad karma before, but by following the Dharma, we will be able to at least attain streamwinning.¹

1.1.2 Synoptic summary

1.1.2.1 The prince, the builder and the flying machine. Prince Bodhi has a palace built. Fearing that the builder will erect a similar palace for another, the prince determines to kill him. He confides his plan to his friend and assistant, Sañjikā,putta, who informs the builder. Forewarned, the builder secretly fashions a huge bird-shaped flying machine. When the machine is ready, the builder, his wife and children, escape in it.

1.1.2.2 The prince invites the Buddha for an alms-meal. Bodhi holds a festival in honour of the palace's completion, and invites the Buddha. The prince, being childless, spreads white cloths over the palace floor: if the Buddha steps on them, he will have a child: otherwise, he will not. The Buddha stops at the palace entrance and refuses to step on the cloths.

When the Buddha looks at Ānanda, he at once understands and requests Bodhi to have the cloths removed. Bodhi escorts the Buddha in and makes the alms-offering. At the end of it, Bodhi asks the Buddha why he is destined to be childless. The Buddha explains by relating this past-life story:

1.1.2.3 The story of the past: The destroyers of birds. A ship is wrecked at sea, losing all on board, except a man and his wife (Bodhi and his wife then). They land on an island. Finding nothing else to eat, they feed on birds' eggs, and then the birds themselves. Their bad karma of destroying life prevents them from having any children.

1.2 SOURCES AND SIGNIFICANCE

1.2.1 The Introduction to **the Dhona,sākha Jātaka** (J 353) makes a brief mention of prince Bodhi putting out the builder's eyes for fear that he may build a similar palace for others. There is no reference, however, to the story of the flying machine.²

1.2.2 The story of the Buddha's visit to prince Bodhi is derived from either **the Bodhi Rāja,kumāra Sutta** (M 85) or **the Cela,pattikā Vatthu** (Cv 5.21.2) in the Vinaya.³ **The Bodhi Rāja,kumāra Vatthu**, however,

¹ See SD 55.5 (3.3.2) (5).

² J 353/3:157 f (SD 55.5).

has a few details which are not found in the other sources, including **the Dhona,sākhā Jātaka** (J 353),⁴ thus:

- **Sañjikā,putta** saves the builder's limbs and life [§§7-13];
- the builder's fabulous bird-like flying machine; the builder (**Kaṭṭha,vāhana**) builds his Himalaya kingdom [§§13-18];⁵
- we are told the reason for Bodhi's covering the palace floor with white cloths: he is **childless** and wants a child [§§19-21];
- **Bodhi directly asks the Buddha** why he **does not step on the cloths**; the Buddha explains [§§25-29];
- The Buddha relates the past existence of Bodhi and his wife, when they **killed** a large number of birds, and closes with **Dh 157** [§§31-37];
- At the end of the Buddha's teaching, Bodhi attains streamwinning [§38].

1.2.3 Dh 157

1.2.3.1 Dh 157 [§37] has counterparts in the following texts:⁶

- **Patna Dharmapada** (PnDh): verse 312 (Cone 1989:185) or verse 313 (Roth 1980b:125);
- the Sanskrit **Udāna-varga** (Uv): verse 5.15 (Bernhard 1965:143);
- and its **Tibetan** counterpart: Uv 5.16 (Beckh 1911:22; Zongtse 1990:79).

1.2.3.2 The Chinese parallels of Dh 157 are found in verses T196 (T4.161a7), T210 (T4.565c21), T211 (T4.593b16) [1.2.3.3], T212 (T4.652b11), and T213 (T4.780a17). They differ in their second part and do not refer to the 3 watches (the 3 period of life).

1.2.3.3 In **T211**, its verse is found in a different story about a monk contemplating suicide on account of his inability to find a breakthrough into the Dharma. T 211 (T4.593b24) concludes by saying that, inspired by the Buddha's verses, he, in due course, becomes an arhat.⁷

Aspects of this story are similar to the Dhammapada story of **Cūḷa,panthaka** (DhA 2.3). However, in Cūḷa,panthaka's case, he does not contemplate suicide but is on the verge of returning to lay life.⁸

1.2.4 Story significance: see SD 55.5 (3.3.2).

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³ V 2:127-129 (SD 55.3).

⁴ Esp the story of the past about Bodhi and his wife (J 353,8-31), SD 55.5, where also see (3.3).

⁵ Comys mention 2 persons named Kaṭṭha,vahana, both skilled in woodwork and were rajahs. DPPN names the builder of Bodhi's palace as **Kaṭṭhavāhana 3**; his namesake, Kaṭṭha,vāhana 1, was a previous life of Bāvarī (the teacher of the 16 youths of Sn). On Kaṭṭha,vāhana 1 (who lived in the time of Kassapa Buddha, the buddha just before our Gotama, SD 49.8b (2)): AA 1:331,25-3321,23; SnA 2:575,3-580,8. See also ThaA 2:73; ApA 363. On **Kaṭṭha,vāhana 3** (the builder of Kokanada, Bodhi's palace): DhA 3:134,5-135,24 (SD 55.4).

⁶ For the parallel verses of Dh 157 in PDh 312 + Uv 5,15, see Ānandajoti 1007:92.

⁷ See also Willemen 1999:121 f.

⁸ DhA 2.3/1:239,14. For its sources, see DhA:B 1:299 n 1; also Analayo 2011:481 n199.

Bodhi Rāja,kumāra Vatthu

The Story of Prince Bodhi

DhA 12.1

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1 *Attānañ ce'ti.*⁹ This Dharma teaching was spoken by the Teacher while he was staying in the Bhesakalā forest in connection with **prince Bodhi**.

1a. The prince, the builder and the flying machine

2 It is said that he had a palace named **Kokanada** (blue lotus) built like no other on the face of the earth, which, as it were, seemed to float in the air. He asked the builder:

3 “Have you ever built a palace like this before, or is this your first accomplishment?”

“This is my first accomplishment, your majesty,” he replied.

4 Prince Bodhi thought: “If this man were to build another palace like this for anyone else, then, there would be nothing fabulous about this palace.

I will kill him, or have his hands and feet cut off, or have his eye gouged! That way he will never build another palace for anyone else!”

5 Now, he told this to an intimate friend, the brahmin youth, **Sañjikā,putta**, who thought:

“For certain, this builder will perish! How can I silently look on, seeing such skill destroyed! I will give him a hint about this.”¹⁰

6 He went to the builder and asked:

“Have you finished your work on the palace or have you not?”

“My work is done,” he replied.

7 “The prince plans to destroy you. Watch out for yourself!” [135] he warned.

8 “Master, it’s good that you have told me this. Now I know just what to do.”

9 Now, when the prince asked the builder:

“Friend, have you finished your work on our palace?”

“No, your majesty,” replied the builder, “my work is unfinished. Much remains to be done.”

10 “What is it that remains to be done?” he asked.

“I will tell you all about it later. Right now, please send me some timber.”

11 “What kind of timber do you need?”

“Dry timber, your majesty, with all the sap dried out.”

The prince had them delivered to him.

12 Then, the builder said to the prince:

“Your majesty, from hereon, no one should see me; for, when I’m engaged in delicate work, it is distracting for me to engage in conversation. At meal-time, only my wife will bring me my food.”

“Very well,” said the prince, in agreement.

13 Thereupon, the builder sat down in a certain room, and using the timber fashioned a **wooden garuda bird**,¹¹ large enough to hold him, his wife and children.

⁹ Ke *attānañ ce piyaṃ jaññā* (ie Dh 157a).

¹⁰ On Sañjikā,putta, see SD 55.2 (4) esp (4.3).

14 When meal-time came, he told his wife:

“Go sell everything in the house and bring me back the money [silver and gold] you receive.”

15 Now, the prince, to ensure that the builder would not leave the house, surrounded it with a strong guard.

16 As for the builder, as soon as the bird was finished, he said to his wife:

“Today, gather our boys and wait.”¹²

17 Immediately after breakfast, he placed his wife and children inside the bird’s belly. Then, the bird soared through the window and was gone.

18 When the guards saw the bird flying away, they cried out:

“Your majesty, the builder has escaped!”

But by then, the builder had made good his escape. Landing in the Himalayas, he created a city to live in. Thereafter, he was known as king Wooden Vehicle (*kaṭṭha, vāhana, rāja*).¹³

1b. The prince invites the Buddha for an almsmeal

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19 The prince decided to hold a **palace festival**¹⁴ to celebrate its completion and invited the Teacher.

20 First, he smeared the palace walls with the 4 kinds of fragrances.¹⁵ Then, he spread cloth-strips over the floor, starting at the threshold.¹⁶

21 It is said that he was childless. For this reason, he had spread the floor-covering, thinking:

“If I will have a son or a daughter, the Teacher will tread on this.”¹⁷

22 When the Teacher arrived, the prince saluted him with the fivefold rests,¹⁸ took his bowl, and said:

“Please enter, bhante,” but the Teacher refused to enter.

For a second time and a third time, he requested him to enter. The Teacher, however, did not enter, but then looked at the elder **Ānanda**.

23 The elder at once knew the look to be a sign that the Teacher did not wish to tread on the cloths.¹⁹

24 Promptly, he bade the prince to have the cloths folded away, saying:

“Noble prince, let them fold up the cloths. The Blessed One will not step on the cloths. The Tathagata has regards for posterity.²⁰”

¹¹ A **garuda** (*garuḷa*; Skt *garuḍa*) is a mythical bird, harpy (MA 2:196 = Nc 235, 3 f; Vism 206; VvA 9 = *supaṇṇa*; DhA 1:144, 279; see SD 27.5a (6.2.0) n. Also called *suparna* (eg J 1:203.12’: SD 52.1 (11.2.1.1) n. The garudas are the mortal enemies of the nagas (serpent-beings): see eg **Uruga J** (J 31/2:12-14). See **Magha V** DhA 2.7,95 (SD 54.22).

¹² *Ajja sabbe pi dārake gahetvā āgaccheyyāsīti bhariyaṃ vatvā,*

¹³ On the builder who became king (*kaṭṭha, vāhana rājā*) and his country (*kaṭṭha, vāhana raṭṭha*), see at (1.2.2).

¹⁴ “Palace festival,” *pāsāda, maha*.

¹⁵ *Pāsādaṃ catu, jātika, gandhehi* paribhaṇḍaṃ katvā pathamaṃ. Paribhaṇḍa* means “a plastered wall” (V 2:113, 172, 220; J 3:384, 4:92, 5:437, 440). [*Be *catu-j, jātiya, gandhehi*. But AA:Be 1:183 etc *catu, jāti, gandhehi*.] The 4 kinds of fragrances are def as “saffron, crape jasmine (Tabernaemontana coronaria), Indian incense, wild flowers” (*kuṅkuma, tagara, turukkha, vana. pupphāhi catu-j, jāti*, DAṬ:Be 2:198 = MAṬ:Be 2:358) or as “gamboge or tamal” (“Xanthochymus pictorius,” *tamāla*) instead of *tagara (catu-j, jātiya, gandhehi) kuṅkuma, turukkha, vana. puppha, tamāla, - patta, gandhehi*, SAṬ:Be 3:335).

¹⁶ *Ummārato paṭṭhāya cela, pattikaṃ patthari.*

¹⁷ *Sacāhaṃ puttaṃ vā dhītaraṃ vā lacchāmi satthā imaraṃ akkamissatīti cintetvā patthari.*

¹⁸ “Saluted him with the fivefold rests,” *pañca, patiṭṭhitena vanditvā.*

¹⁹ *Thero olokita, saññāy’eva vatthānaṃ anakkamaṇa, bhāvaṃ ñātvā,*

²⁰ *Pacchima, janataṃ tathāgato oloketīti.* In **Bodhi Rāja, kumāra S** (M 85, 7.6) Ce Ee Se read *apaloketi* (he looks, regards) (SD 55.3), which is practically synonymous: but see vl there.

25 The prince having had the cloths folded up, escorted the Teacher into the palace. He served him with alms of rice-porridge and hard foods. Then, he saluted the Teacher, and sitting at one side, said to him:

“Bhante, I am your benefactor.²¹ Thrice have I gone for refuge. Once, I was told, it was when I was still in my mother’s womb.²² The second time was when I was a mere boy; and the third time, when I’ve reached the age of reason.²³

This being the case, why did you not step on my floor-covering?”

26 “Noble prince, with what thought did you spread those cloths over the floor?”

27 “Bhante, this thought was in my mind: ‘If I shall have a son or a daughter, the Teacher will step on these cloths.’”

28 “It was for that very reason that I did not step on the cloths.”

“But, bhante, [137] is it because I will have neither a son nor a daughter?”

“It is, noble prince.”

29 “What is the reason for this?”

“In a former birth, you lapsed into heedlessness towards other beings.”²⁴

“When was that, bhante?”

30 In response to this (question), the Teacher explained the matter by relating the past.

1a. The story of the past: The destroyers of birds

31 “Once upon a time, it is said, several hundred people went out to sea in a large ship. When they reached mid-ocean, they were shipwrecked. Everyone perished, except for the husband and wife, who, clinging to a plank reached a nearby island.

32 Now, on that island lived a large flock of birds. Both husband and wife, overcome with hunger, and seeing nothing else to eat, cooked the birds’ eggs over hot coals and ate them.

33 When the eggs were insufficient to satisfy their hunger, they caught the birds and their young and ate them, too.²⁵ Thus, did they eat them in their youth, in mid-life and in old age.

In not a single period of life were they heedful. Neither of the two was heedful.”

34 When the Teacher had shown the prince his past misdeed, he said:

“Noble prince, if in a single one of the 3 periods of your life in that birth, you and your wife had been heedful, you would have obtained a son or a daughter in one of the 3 periods of your present life. Furthermore, if either of you had been heedful, on that account, too, you would have obtained a son or a daughter.

35 Noble prince, when a person considers his life dear, he should guard it with heedfulness during the 3 periods of his life.²⁶

²¹ “Benefactor,” *upakāraka*, ie, a lay supporter. A better known term is *upaṭṭhāka* (Ānanda, D 1:206,2; Nāgita, A3:31,2); less commonly, *upaṭṭhaka* (of Citta and Hatth’ālavaja, B 3.16; Ghaṭikāra (of Kassapa Buddha, B 25.12).

²² *Kucchi,gato kir’amhi ekavāraṃ saraṇaṃ gato*. Apparently, *upakāraka* is more often merely a lay alms-donor, while *upaṭṭhāka* is a monastic attendant.

²³ *Dutiyaṃ taruṇa,dārakāle, tatiyaṃ viññū.bhāvaṃ patta,kale*. The cpd *taruṇa,dārakāle* is an accidentally shortened form (a haplology) of *taruṇa,dāraka,kale*, where one of the repeated syllables is lost; DhA:Be 2:86 gives *taruṇa,dāraka,kāle*. The cpd *taruṇa,dāraka* occurs at AA 2:236; J 1:338,3:38, 6:219; VbhA 447.

²⁴ *Purimaka,satta,bhāve jāyāya saddhiṃ pamādaṃ āpannattā’ti*.

²⁵ In keeping to the context of the story, I have taken *sakuṇa-c,chāpe* as dvandva, tr it as “the birds and their young.”

²⁶ The 3 periods of life are: (1) childhood, (2) youth and (3) adulthood.

Failing that, he should at least guard himself during one of the 3 periods of his life.”

36 When the Teacher had thus spoken, he pronounced the following verse”:

37 *Attānañ ce piyaṃ jaññā
rakkheyya naṃ surakkhitaṃ
tiṇṇaṃ aññataraṃ yāmaṃ
paṭijaggeyya paṇḍito'ti*

(Dh 157) [1.2.3]

If a person loves his own life,
he should guard it well.
During any of the three watches,
the wise would be watchful. **[138]**

[The Commentary has been omitted.]

38 At the end of the teaching, the prince was established in the fruit of streamwinning. The congregation, too, gained various benefits from the teaching.²⁷

— evaṃ —

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²⁷ *Sampatta, parisāya pi sātthikā desanā ahoṣīti.*