

Learning Dhamma From Rabbits

A reflection on the Sasa Jātaka (J 316)¹

By Piya Tan

Origin of the Rabbit Jataka

The Jātaka Commentary tells us that the Buddha and the monks, residing in Jeta’s Grove, outside Sāvattihī, were once offered almsfood daily for a fortnight by the city treasurer (*kuṭumbika*). At the end, of that period, the treasurer offered the Buddha and the monks the 4 requisites (food, robes, shelter and medicines). During the thanksgiving sermon, the Buddha tells this story of the rabbit.

[Here is a simplified retelling of the Jātaka with a modern commentary by Piya Tan.]

The 4 friends

Once upon a time when Brahmadata was king of Benares, the Bodhisattva (our Buddha in a past life) was a young rabbit who lived in a forest. On one side of this forest was the foot of a mountain, on another side a river, and on the third side a border-village. The rabbit had 3 friends—a monkey, a jackal and an otter.

These 4 wise beings lived together and each of them got his food on his own hunting-ground, and in the evening they gathered together. The rabbit was wisely guiding his 3 friends in the Dhamma, teaching them to give alms, keep the precepts, and observe the uposatha (fast day). They accepted the rabbit’s admonition, and each went on to his part of the forest and dwelt there.

One day, the rabbit, looking at the moon, knew that the next day would be an uposatha day. He said to his friends:

“Tomorrow is a fast day. Let all three of you keep the precepts and observe the fast day. One who keeps the precepts, gives alms bring great fruit. Therefore, feed any beggars needing food who come to you by giving food from that which you have prepared for yourself.”

They readily agreed, saying “Sadhu!” and each returned to his own dwelling.

[On the negative side, such a tradition encourages lazy young people to live the parasitic lives of swamis (holy men) to be supported by society. This actually happened not because of Buddhism but because of similar teachings in many other religious traditions and folk beliefs in India.]

¹ Based on the translation by H T Francis, *Stories of the Buddha’s Former Births* vol 3, Cambridge Univ Press, 1897:34-37.

The otter

Early the next morning, the otter went down to the Ganges River bank to seek his prey. Now it happened that a fisherman had caught 7 redfish, strung them together, and buried them in the sand of the river's bank. Then, he went down to the river to catch more fish.

The otter, scenting the buried fish, dug them, and pulling them out cried aloud thrice, "Does anyone own these fish?"

Not seeing any owner, he took hold of the string of fish, and kept them in his dwelling, intending to eat them at a proper time. Then, he lay down, thinking how virtuous he was!

[We must imagine here that otters were in the habit of finding such buried fish, and the fisherman knew about this, and did not mind. And that the clever otter, being an otter, knew just this, on this day. Anyway, he would have preferred fresh fish.

This practice is traditionally done by monks who find "dust-heap" (*paṃsukula*) cloth, discarded or placed on a low tree-branch, for monks to use them for their rag-robles. Those monks who find such cloth will basically call out just as the otter does for the fish.]

The jackal

The jackal too went forth in quest of food, went into the hut of a field-watcher (watchman who kept cows from eating crops in the field), and found 2 spits, a (dead) iguana and a pot of milk-curd. After thrice crying aloud, "To whom do these belong?" and not finding an owner, he put on his neck the rope for lifting the pot, and grasping the spits and the iguana with his teeth, he brought and kept them in his own lair, thinking,

"In due time I will eat them," and so lay down, reflecting how virtuous he had been."

The monkey

As for the monkey, he climbed into a clump of trees, and plucked a bunch of mangoes. He kept them up in his forest dwelling, meaning to eat them in due time, thinking how virtuous he was.

The rabbit

Now the rabbit (the Bodhisattva) came out, intending to eat some kusa grass. As he lay in the forest, he thought:

"It is impossible for me to offer grass to any beggars that may chance to appear, and I have neither oil nor rice nor such like. If any beggar shall beg from me, I shall have to give him my own flesh to eat!"

Sakra

At this remarkable display of virtue, Sakra's white marble throne (in the heaven of the 33) began to heat up. Upon reflection, Sakra learned the cause and resolved to put the rabbit to the test.

First of all, he went to the otter's dwelling-place, disguised as a brahmin. On being asked why he was there, he replied, "Wise sir, if I could get something to eat, after keeping the fast, I would perform all my recluse practice."

The otter replied, "Very well, I will give you some food," and he offered him the fish that he had. The brahmin thanked him and went away.

Next, he went to the jackal, and when asked why he was there, he replied in the same way. The jackal offered the iguana and milk curd. The brahmin thanked him and went away.

Then he went to the monkey, and when asked why he was there, he answered just as before. The monkey readily offered him some mangoes. The brahmin thanked him and went away.

Sakra and the rabbit

And Sakra went to the wise rabbit, and when asked why he was there, he made the same reply. The rabbit on hearing what he wanted was greatly delighted, and said,

"Brahmin, you have done well in coming to me for food. This day will I grant you a boon that I have never granted before, but you shall not break the precept by taking animal life. Go, friend, and when you have piled together logs of wood, and kindled a fire, come and let me know. I will sacrifice myself by jumping into the flames, and when my body is roasted, you shall eat my flesh and fulfil all your recluse duties."

The ice-cold fire

Rising from his bed of kusa grass and coming to the fire, he thrice shook himself so that if there were any insects within his fur, they might escape death.

Then offering his whole body as a gift, he sprang up, and like a royal swan, alighting on a cluster of lotuses, in an ecstasy of joy, he fell on the heap of live coals. But the flame failed even to heat the pores of the hair on the rabbit's body. It was as if he had entered a frosty place.

Then he addressed Sakra in these words:

"Brahmin, the fire you have kindled is icy-cold: it fails to heat even the pores of the hair on my body. What is the meaning of this?"

"Wise sir," he replied, "I am no brahmin. I am Sakra, and I have come to put your virtue to the test."

The Bodhisattva said,
"It's not only you, Sakra, but anyone in the world were to try me in this matter of almsgiving, they would not find in me any unwillingness to give!" This was his lion-roar.

The rabbit in the moon

Then said Sakra to the Bodhisattva, " O wise rabbit, your virtue will be known throughout a whole of this world-cycle!"

Taking the mountain into his palm, he squeezed it, and with the essence thus extracted, he daubed the sign of a rabbit on the moon. And after placing the rabbit on a bed of soft kusa, in that very same forest, Sakra returned to his heaven.

And these 4 wise beings lived happily and harmoniously together, keeping the precepts and observing the uposatha days, till they departed to fare according to their deeds.

The Jātaka characters

The Teacher, when he had ended his lesson, clarified the truth and identified the births:
"At that time, Ānanda was the otter, Moggallāna was the jackal, Sariputtā the monkey, and I myself was the wise rabbit."

At the conclusion of the Dharma teaching, the treasurer who gave the 4 supports attained streamwinning.

NEW YEAR REFLECTION

This lunar new year, let us recall the spiritual friendship of the 4 friends, even as animals, are able to live in virtue, keep the uposatha, and willing to make great sacrifices. When we seem to have to make a great sacrifice in our own lives, it is our good karma ripening, preparing us to get more good karma to ripen. When we make sacrifices for the benefit of others, doing it with joy, we are really creating great good karma for our own well being to grow in the Dhamma, getting closer to the path.

Making others happy, we gain greater happiness wherever we are or will be.

Make this Year of the Rabbit a blessed year for the blessing of more years to come.

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[an occasional re-look at the Buddha's Example and Teachings]

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