

Tipiṭaka. Suttapiṭaka. Khuddakanikāya. Jātaka. Mahākapijātaka.

Mahakapi Jataka  
The Great Monkey King  
Jat 407

One day in Jetavana Monastery bhikkhus began talking about the good that the Buddha did for his relatives. When the Buddha asked them about their subject, and they told him, he said, "Bhikkhus, this is not the first time the Tathagata has done good works to



benefit his relatives." Then he told this story of the past.

Long, long ago, when Brahmadata was reigning in Baranasi, the Bodhisatta was born as a monkey in the Himalayas. When he was fully grown, he was extremely strong and vigorous and became the leader of a troop of eighty thousand monkeys.

On the bank of the Ganges there was an enormous mango tree,

with two massive branches so thick with leaves it looked like a mountain. Its sweet fruit was of exquisite fragrance and flavor. One branch spread over the bank of the river, but the other extended over the water. One day, while the monkey king was eating the succulent fruit, he thought, "If any of this fruit ever fell into the river, great danger could come to us." To prevent this, he ordered the monkeys to pick all the mango flowers or tiny fruit from that branch. One fruit, however, was hidden by an ant's nest and escaped the monkeys' attention. When it ripened, it fell into the river.

At that time, the King of Baranasi was bathing and amusing himself in the river. Whenever the king bathed in the river, he had nets stretched both upstream and

downstream from where he was. The mango floated down the river and stuck in the net upstream from the king. That evening, as the king was leaving, the fishermen pulled in the net and found the fruit. As they had never seen a fruit like this before, they showed it to the king.

"What is this fruit?" the king asked.

"We do not know, sire," they answered.

"Who will know?"

"The foresters, sire."

The king summoned the foresters, who told him that the fruit was a mango. The king cut it with a knife and, after having the foresters eat some, tasted it himself. He also gave some of the fruit to the ministers and to his wives.

The king could not forget the magnificent flavor of the ripe mango. Obsessed with desire for the new fruit, he called the foresters again and asked where the tree stood. When he learned that it was on the bank of the river, he had many rafts joined together and sailed upstream to find it. In due course, the king and his retinue arrived at the site of the huge tree.

The king went ashore and set up a camp. After having eaten some of the delectable mangoes, he retired for the night on a bed prepared at the foot of the tree. Fires were lit and guards set on each side.

At midnight, after the men had fallen asleep and all was quiet, the monkey king came with his troop. The eighty thousand monkeys moved from branch to branch eating mangoes. The noise woke the king, who roused his archers.

"Surround those monkeys eating mangoes and shoot them," he ordered. "Tomorrow we will dine on mango fruit and monkey's flesh."

The archers readied their bows to obey the king. The monkeys saw the archers and realized that all means of escape had been cut off. Shivering in fear of death, they ran to

their leader and cried, "Sire, there are men with bows all around the tree preparing to shoot us. What can we do?"

"Do not fear," he comforted them. "I will save your lives." Then he climbed onto the branch stretching over the river. Springing from the end of it, he jumped a hundred bow-lengths and landed on the opposite bank of the Ganges. Judging the distance he had jumped, he thought, "That is how far I came." Then he found a long vine and cut it, thinking, "This much will be fastened to a tree, and this much will go across the river." He secured one end of the vine to a sturdy tree and the other around his own waist. Then he again leapt across the river with the speed of a cloud blown by the wind. In his calculation, however, he had forgotten to include the length to be tied around his own waist, so he could not reach the trunk of the mango tree. He reached out and grabbed the end of a branch firmly with both hands. He signaled to the troop of monkeys and cried, "Quick! Step on my back and run along this vine to safety. Good luck to you all!"

The eighty thousand monkeys, each in turn, respectfully saluted the monkey king, asked his pardon, and escaped in this way. The last monkey in the troop, however, had long resented the leader and wished to overthrow him. When he saw the monkey king hanging there, he exulted, "This is my chance to see the last of my enemy!" Climbing onto a high branch, he flung himself down on the monkey king's back with a dreadful blow that broke his heart. Having caused his rival excruciating pain, the wicked monkey triumphantly escaped and left the monkey king to suffer alone.

Having seen all that had happened as he lay on his bed, the king thought, "This noble monkey king, not caring for his own life, has ensured the safety of his troop. It would be wrong to destroy such an animal. I will have him brought down and taken care of." He ordered his men to lower the monkey gently down to a raft on the Ganges. After the monkey had been brought ashore and washed, the king anointed him with the purest oil. Spreading an oiled skin on his own bed and laying the monkey king on it, the king covered him with a yellow robe. After the noble animal had been given sugared water to drink, the king himself took a low seat and addressed him, "Noble monkey, you made yourself a bridge for all the other monkeys to pass over to safety. What are you to them, and what are they to you?" he asked.

The monkey explained, "Great king, I guard the herd. I am their lord and chief. When they were filled with fear of your archers, I leapt a great distance to save them. After I had tied a vine around my waist, I returned to this mango tree. My strength was almost gone, but I managed to hold the branch so that my monkeys could pass over my back and reach safety. Because I could save them, I have no fear of death. Like a righteous king, I could guarantee the happiness of those over whom I used to reign. Sire, understand this truth! If you wish to be a righteous ruler, the happiness of your kingdom, your cities, and your people must be dear to you. It must be dearer than life itself."

After teaching the king in this way, the monkey king died. The king gave orders that the monkey king should be given a royal funeral. He ordered his wives to carry torches to the cemetery with their hair disheveled.

The ministers sent a hundred wagon loads of wood for the funeral pyre. When the regal ceremony was over, the ministers took the skull to the king. The king built a shrine at the monkey's burial place, and made offerings of incense and flowers. He had the skull inlaid with gold, raised on a spear, and carried in front of the procession returning to Baranasi. There he put it at the royal gate and paid homage to it with incense and flowers. The whole city was decorated, and the skull was honored for seven days. For the rest of his life the king revered the skull as a relic, offering incense and garlands. Established in the wonderful teaching of the monkey king, he gave alms and performed other good deeds. He ruled his kingdom righteously and became destined for heaven.



After the lesson, the Buddha declared the Truths and identified the Birth: "At that time the king was Ananda, the monkey retinue was this assembly, the wicked monkey was Devadatta, and I myself was the monkey king."

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## Notes

1. Robes, food, lodgings, and medicines.

2. The asuras, the predecessors of the devas, lost their heaven because Sakka was able to expel them when they were too drunk to fight him.
  
3. The Buddha Kassapa was the Buddha immediately preceding Gotama in the lineage of the Buddhas.
  
4. Gold, silver, pearls, gems, cat's eyes, diamonds and coral.

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