

The Dog-Birth: Kukkura-Jataka
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Translated from the Pali and retold by Margo McLoughlin

Once the Bodhisatta was born as a dog. He lived in a great cemetery outside the city of Varanasi, surrounded by dogs of all kinds—hundreds and hundreds of dogs. They were not purebred hounds: They were mongrels and mutts, and they survived by their wits.

It happened that one day the king, feeling too restless to attend to his duties, summoned his chariot and set off for the royal pleasure gardens. His two-wheeled chariot was drawn by a pair of white horses, their gorgeous trappings of braided leather gleaming in the sunlight. When they reached the pleasure gardens, the king spent the greater part of the day enjoying himself. At sunset he re-entered the city and returned to the palace. There he dismounted and retired to his quarters. The horses were tended to, but no one remembered to unfasten the chariot's fine leather harness and it was left dragging on the ground.

That night it rained and the harness was soaked. The king's hounds came leaping down from the terrace and began to chew and gnaw on the leather straps of the harness.

The next day, the king's servants gave their report to the king: "Your Majesty, after the rain last night, stray dogs came into the courtyard through the drain. They have chewed and destroyed your chariot's fine leather harness."

The king was furious. At once, he gave his orders: "Kill these dogs, wherever they are seen."

From that moment a great misery befell the wandering strays of Varanasi. Many fled the city. They came to the cemetery where the Bodhisatta lived. When he saw the dogs approaching, the Bodhisatta questioned them: "What brings you in such numbers?" They told him all: "Dogs have gnawed and destroyed the leather harness on the king's chariot. In his anger, the king has given orders to kill all the strays in the city. Many are being done away with and we live in fear."

The Bodhisatta, King of the Dogs, put his head down between his paws and reflected: "The palace grounds are well guarded. There is no secret entrance or opening for so many dogs to come in. The chariot harness must have been destroyed by dogs inside the king's palace. It must be the king's hunting hounds that did it. And at this moment, the true perpetrators have received no punishment of any kind, while those who are not responsible are under a sentence of death. I

shall go to the palace, show the king the real culprits and save my kin." Then the Bodhisatta sat up and spoke calming words to his relatives: "Do not be afraid any longer. As soon as I see the king, I will show him who destroyed his leather harness."

Then he summoned the perfections and chose loving-kindness to be his guide. He entered the city all alone and unseen, saying, "Let none throw a clod of earth or a club at me." And it was so. Not a single person, seeing him, raised a hand against him.

The King had given his orders for the slaughter of the dogs, and now he was sitting in the Hall of Justice. While he sat there, the Bodhisatta slipped into the hall, sprang forward, and hid himself under the king's seat. There he crouched, panting. Straight away, the king's men approached, intent on getting him out. But the king stopped them. The Bodhisatta, somewhat restored, came out from under the throne and bowed before the king.

Speaking in a human voice, he said, "Is it you who gave orders for the dogs to be killed?"

"Yes," answered the king. "It is I."

"What is their offence, King of Men?"

"They have gnawed and destroyed the leather work covering my chariot."

"Do you know without a doubt which dogs destroyed it?"

"No," the king admitted, "we do not know."

"Your Majesty, this is not just. You do not know for certain which are the leather-chewing culprits, yet you have given order to kill dogs wherever they are seen."

"This is true. I gave orders to kill all of the dogs, all these chewers of chariot leather, wherever they are seen."

"But are your men killing all the dogs, or are there some who are not under sentence of death?"

"Yes, there are some. The dogs in our household are not under sentence of death."

"Great King, a moment ago you said, 'I gave orders to kill all of the dogs, all these chewers of chariot leather, wherever they are seen', but now you say, 'The dogs in our household are not under sentence of death' Are you not showing favor to one group? This is partiality, one of the four wrong courses of action. It is not fitting, nor is it kingly justice. Justice ought to be measured and balanced, as if one were using a weighing pole. It ought to come from careful searching for a cause. At this time, the dogs in your household are not under sentence of death,

while the stray dogs of the city are. This is not slaughter of all the dogs, it is murder of the weak and unprotected." '

The king listened and then addressed the King of the Dogs:

"Wise one, do you know who is responsible for destroying the leather harness?"

"Yes, I do know," answered the Bodhisatta. "It was the purebred dogs in your own home."

The king frowned. "How do you know it was them?"

"I will show you."

"Yes," said the king. "Show me."

The Bodhisatta asked that the king's hounds be gathered in the courtyard. He requested a supply of buttermilk and some kusa grass.

Then the Bodhisatta said: "Crush the kusa grass and mix it in with the buttermilk. Give the mixture to the dogs to drink." The king nodded and clapped his hands. Servants brought a mortar and crushed the kusa grass with a stone pestle. Into the mortar they poured a measure of sweet-smelling buttermilk, mixed the two ingredients together, and poured the lumpy mixture into the dog's drinking trough. The king's dogs came, with their tails wagging, and lapped it up. But no sooner was the mixture all gone than the dogs could be seen heaving and vomiting all over the palace courtyard. Along with the buttermilk and kusa grass, up came bits of chariot leather, plainly visible on the palace grounds.

The king was satisfied. "You have shown me the real culprits," he said to the Bodhisatta-King of the Dogs. "I bow to you." Then he reached for the white parasol of kingship and offered it to the Bodhisatta.

The Bodhisatta allowed the parasol to be held above him. "Great King, you must do what is right," he said. Then he taught the Dhamma to the king with verses of ethical instruction. He finished by saying, "Great King, from this moment on, be mindful. Be diligent." He established the king in the five precepts and returned the parasol of kingship.

The king offered freedom and safety to all beings. He established a continuous food supply, much like what he ate himself, for all the dogs. He kept the precepts and made merit by practicing generosity. At the end of his life he was reborn in the heaven realms. The dog's teaching endured for ten thousand years. And as for the Bodhisatta, he also lived out his life and fared according to his actions.