

Cakkavāka-Jātaka

*Translated from the Pāli by H.T. Francis, M.A., Sometime Fellow of Gonville and Caius College, and
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Once upon a time when Brahmadata was reigning in Benares, a greedy crow went about eating the bodies of dead elephants, and not satisfied with them he thought, "I will eat the fat of fish on the bank of the Ganges," and after staying a few days there eating dead fish he went into the Himālaya and lived on various kinds of wild fruits. Coming to a large lotus-tank abounding in fish and turtles, he saw there two golden-coloured geese who lived on the sevāla plant. He thought, "These birds are very beautiful and well-favoured: their food must be delightful. I will ask them what it is, and by eating the same I too shall become golden-coloured." So he went to them, and after the usual kindly greetings to them as they sat perched on the end of a bough, he spoke the first stanza in connexion with their praises:

Twin pair of birds in yellow dressed,
So joyous roaming to and fro;
What kind of birds do men love best?
This is what I am fain to know.

[521] The ruddy goose on hearing this spoke the second stanza:

O bird, of human kind the pest,
We above other birds are blest.
All lands with our "devotion" ring
And men and birds our praises sing.
Know then that ruddy geese are we,
And fearless wander o'er the seat.

Hearing this the crow spoke the third stanza:

What fruits upon the sea abound,
And whence may flesh for geese be found?
Say on what heavenly food ye live,
Such beauty and such strength to give.

[522] Then the ruddy goose spoke the fourth stanza:

No fruits are on the sea to eat,
And whence should ruddy geese have meat?
Sevāla plant, stript of its skin,
Yields food without a taint of sin.

Then the crow spoke two stanzas:

I like not, goose, the words you use:
I once believed the food we choose
To nourish us, ought to agree
With what our outward form might be.
But now I doubt it, for I eat

Rice, salt, and oil, and fruit, and meat:
As heroes feast returned from fight,
So I too in good cheer delight.
But though I live on dainty fare,
My looks with yours may not compare.

[523] Then the ruddy goose told the reason why the crow failed to attain to personal beauty, while he himself attained to it, and spoke the remaining stanzas:

Not satisfied with fruit, or garbage found
Within the precincts of the charnel ground,
The greedy crow pursues in wanton flight
The casual prey that tempts his appetite.

But all that thus shall work their wicked will,
And for their pleasure harmless creatures kill,
Upbraided by their conscience pine away,
And see their strength and comeliness decay.

So happy beings that no creatures harm
In form gain vigour and in looks a charm,
For beauty surely be it understood
Depends not wholly on the kind of food.

[524] Thus did the ruddy goose in many ways reproach the crow. And the crow having brought this reproach upon himself said, "I want not your beauty." And with a cry of "Caw, Caw," he flew away.