

The Crow-Birth

A Jātaka Story

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Jātaka is a Pali word meaning “birth-story” (*jāta*—“that which is born” and *ka*—from *katheti*—“to relate”). The Jātaka may simply be Indian folklore re-worked to suit Buddhist aims, but they are also believed to be the Buddha’s own account of his previous lives. In each of these tales, the Bodhisatta [one committed to awakening] is seen perfecting those qualities that led to his full awakening as the Buddha of our era. Scenes from the Jātaka appear on the carved stone railings at Sanchi and Bharhut in India and have been dated to the second century BCE. What is remarkable about these stories is that ancient as they are, they still serve as the principal means for imparting Buddhist values to children and adults of all ages in the Buddhist countries of Southeast Asia. What is also remarkable about the Jātaka is the way an apparently simple story can reveal so much depth of understanding of human psychology and human potential. We have no way of knowing how these stories affected their listeners, except to consider how they affect us.

I first translated Kāka-Jātaka, “The Crow-Birth,” in 2001. I have told it many

times since then, and I find I am still learning what this story is about. Each setting, each new context, adds a new layer. The way listeners respond, or the comments they make, deepen my understanding of what this story is teaching, which just goes to show that stories don’t exist in theory, but only in practice, in the dynamic exchange between teller and listener or reader. What follows is a translation and commentary of Jātaka 140, “The Crow-Birth.”



"I can't help myself," said the crow, "I have to do it!"

Once, in the past, the Bodhisatta came into being in the womb of a crow. Now in those days, just as in these days, a crow would make its living however it could, scavenging and foraging inside the walls of the city and outside, in the villages, the forests, and the fields.

In British Columbia, where I now live, there are crows everywhere—dropping mussels or nuts on the pavement, hopping politely out of the way on the sidewalks, careening wildly down from their perch on a telephone wire, always giving the impression of intelligent opinions, as well as a certain deviousness, necessary to their survival. In Boston, where I was living when I first translated this story, there were not many crows, but there were a large number of homeless men and women. The image of the crow as forager and scavenger struck me most vividly when I saw a man systematically investigating the contents of the trash cans along a residential street in Cambridge. He was just doing his job, like the crow, making the most out of other people's leavings.

One morning, the king's high priest left the city early. He went out by the eastern gate and down to the holy river, the Ganges, to bathe. When he had bathed he put on fresh, white, muslin robes. He adorned himself with sweet scents. He set a garland of jasmine flowers about his neck and returned towards the city. There were two crows sitting on the gate. One crow said to the other, "I have an idea. I shall let some droppings fall on the shiny head of that Brahmin. See him coming from the river, freshly washed, in his fine robes?" "What?" said the second crow. "You would do what? This Brahmin is a lord. If his anger is aroused, he could cause the destruction of all the crows." The first crow shrugged his shoulders. "I can't help myself," he said. "I have to do it."

At this point in the story, I often hear the audience laugh. Something about the first crow's honesty strikes a chord with them. "I can't stop myself," he is saying. "I have to follow through. I am compelled to perform this act of mischief, no matter what the consequences." The crow knows how hard it would be to divert the course of his will. Likewise, we all recognize that such momentary inclinations,

apparently without much significance, have a certain momentum. The ability to interrupt an impulse, see it for what it is, understand clearly the results that may follow, and make another choice, is a highly developed skill.

"Well then," said the second crow, "we'll see what happens." And he flew away. Sure enough, just as the king's high priest came below the gate, that crow, setting forth into flight, let some droppings fall right on the Brahmin's shiny head. The priest, looking up, saw the source of his humiliation—a black-winged crow. Anger was born in his heart and he set himself to take revenge upon all the crows.

The Pali text is very clear to show the visiting status of anger. As one of the *kilesas*, or defilements, anger is portrayed as a temporary visitor to the mind/heart. (The duration of the stay depends on the amount of "fuel" given it by the victim of the act of mischief.) The priest does not "become angry," or "feel anger"—two ways we might describe the experience in modern English usage. Instead, anger is "born in his heart" and its arrival is the condition for the high priest to seek revenge. He directs his mind to cause harm to the one who caused him shame and humiliation. But, since all crows look alike from the human perspective, there is no way to limit retaliation to the single perpetrator. All crows must suffer for the sins of one.

Now at that time, the story continues, a certain serving-girl was earning her wages by guarding the rice outside the granary sheds, not far from the king's elephant stables. She had spread the rice in the sun to dry, and there she sat in the door of the shed, guarding it. The day was hot, and it wasn't long before the girl fell asleep. A certain long-haired goat, wandering about, noticed that the girl was off her guard. He came up and began to nibble and chew on the rice. At the sound of his snuffling and chewing, the girl woke up and shooed him away. She sat herself down once again, and once again she fell asleep. The goat came back and continued to nibble and chew on the rice. The girl woke a second time and a second time shooed him away. And it all happened a third time, exactly as before.



Then the girl said to herself, "This goat, returning again and again, will eat up half the rice and then I am sure to lose my wages." She went to a nearby cooking fire and took out a long, smoldering stick. Holding the stick by one end, she returned to her seat by the granary shed and pretended to fall asleep. When she heard the goat begin to nibble once more, the girl stood up and flung the burning stick, striking him on the long hair of his body, which caught fire. With his body burning, the goat went leaping and jumping right to the elephant stables where he rolled in a pile of straw. The straw blazed up, the stables caught fire, and before the fire could be put out, many of the elephants were badly burned.

The king's elephant doctors could find no cure for the wounds on the elephants' backs. This they reported to the king. The king was distressed, for he was very fond of his elephants.

He said to his high priest, "Teacher, do you know any cure for the wounds on my elephants' backs?"

"Yes, your majesty, I do," replied the king's high priest. "Crows' fat."

"Crows' fat?" said the king.

"Yes," explained the Brahmin. "It is an ancient remedy, handed down through many generations. Only you will have to slaughter a great many crows, if you want enough fat to heal the wounds on your elephants' backs."

Conditions have come together to provide the king's high priest with exactly the circumstances he needs to satisfy his desire for revenge. The brief appearance of the serving girl in the story is like a cameo lesson on the importance of mindfulness. Because she could not stay awake, the girl had to resort to more drastic means to get rid of the goat. But setting the goat on fire is a case of overkill, and the chain

of events that follow points to how everything we do has one or more effects, including many we may never have imagined. Blaming the serving-girl for not being mindful, however, is not the point. We have no way of knowing why she kept falling asleep. Perhaps her mother was ill, and she was up all night caring for her or for younger siblings. We just don't know. The scene reveals, however, the way that an intention, whether for good or for ill, once planted in the mind, is ever on the look-out for the conditions which will allow it to manifest. It also demonstrates the way that one person's actions, one person's karma, intersect with another's.

"Very well," said the king. "Let the crows be killed and their fat obtained."

The orders were given, and on that day a great slaughter of crows began in the city of Varanasi. From the temple roofs and the branches of the banyan trees, the king's archers shot them down. Black bodies tumbled and fell. Heaps of dead crows could be seen in every street. They were gathered in carts and taken to the king's kitchens where they were boiled in great cauldrons. So little fat was obtained as to be of almost no use at all. But still the orders continued: the crows of the city were to be shot and killed—young and old, male and female, large and small. A great fear was born in the crows of Varanasi—the fear of death.

The king is motivated by compassion for his elephants. But with the goal in mind of lessening their suffering and healing the wounds on their backs, he is oblivious to the suffering of other creatures—creatures for whom he has less affection. He seeks the advice of his high-priest and accepts it without question. He never stops to consider what might be motivating his high-priest to offer up crows' fat as a cure for burns. A leader is only as good and wise as those he has chosen to advise him. In this passage we also see a second example of the visiting nature of the *kilesas*. *"A great fear was born in the crows of Varanasi—the fear of death."*

The story now changes scenes and takes us into the forest:

At that time the Bodhisatta lived in a forest cemetery. One night, one of the city crows came and told the Bodhisatta what was happening in Varanasi. The Bodhisatta reflected, "Besides myself, there is no other

who can cure my kinsmen of their fear.” He flew up into a Sal tree where, alighting on a branch, he called to mind the ten perfections: *dāna-pāramī*—generosity; *sīla-pāramī*—virtue; *nekkhamma-pāramī*—renunciation; *khanti-pāramī*—patience; *virīya-pāramī*—energy; *paññā-pāramī*—wisdom; *sacca-pāramī*—truthfulness; *adhiṭṭhāna-pāramī*—resolve; *mettā-pāramī*—loving-kindness; *upekkhā-pāramī*—equanimity.

Selecting loving-kindness as his guide, he flew through the forest, over the gates of the city, right to the king’s palace where he entered by an open window. Alighting before the king’s empty seat, he hid himself beneath it. The king was just entering the chamber as a serving-man came forward to catch and remove the crow. But the king said, “No. Let him be.” The Bodhisatta, recovering himself, once more called up loving-kindness to be his guide. He stepped out from under the king’s throne and addressed the king.

This is one part of the story that struck me most when I was translating it. Here, embedded in an ancient Buddhist narrative, we see a leader whose people are being systematically and unjustly slaughtered consider carefully how he wishes his actions to be guided. Will they be guided by anger? By hatred? By fear? Or is it possible to choose another route?

The Bodhisatta reviews each of the ten *pāramīs* (Sanskrit: *pāramitas*) in turn, beginning with generosity and ending with equanimity. Any one of these qualities might serve him well in his encounter with the king, but he selects *mettā* or loving-kindness as his guide. Why does he choose *mettā*? *Mettā* is unconditional friendliness. *Mettā* recognizes the truth that whatever we do we are motivated by the simple wish

to be happy. By calling up *mettā*, not once but twice, the Bodhisatta-Crow is choosing to place himself on equal footing with the king. He radiates with his words and his being this understanding—that all beings wish for happiness and ease of well-being. He does not judge or condemn. Indeed, his loving-kindness contains within it all the other qualities, including patience, wisdom, and truthfulness.

“Your majesty,” said the Bodhisatta, “I too am a king. A great fear has been born in my people—the fear of death. Is it not true, your Majesty, that a king should do everything in his power for the well-being and safety of his people?”

The king was amazed to be addressed by this creature, but he nodded, and the Bodhisatta continued.

“Your Majesty,” he said, “The king’s high priest has fallen under the influence of anger. He has spoken an untruth. He has told you that crow’s fat will heal the wounds on your elephants’ backs. But the truth is that crows have almost no fat at all.”

The king was so moved that he ordered a royal seat be given to the king of the crows, fresh water in a golden bowl, and sweet rice in a golden dish. The Bodhisatta leapt up on the seat. He nibbled and drank. The king addressed him, saying, “Wise one, tell me, how is it that crows have almost no fat?”

The Bodhisatta answered, “The reason is simple and I shall explain:

With a heart forever anxious, and the whole world at our back,

Because of that there is no ounce of fat for my relatives, the crows.”

This is a fascinating commentary, contained within the story, on the nature and personality of crows and the way they are



***“See how one unguarded impulse, arising in the mind,
causes much suffering for many?”***

perceived by human beings. As scavengers and foragers they can never rest. As less than equal co-residents of city streets they are commonly persecuted. It is for this reason that they never have the luxury of acquiring fat.

The Bodhisatta instructed the king in the five precepts. He asked for an end to the slaughter of crows. He asked for protection for all creatures. To both the king agreed and, in addition, he offered the Bodhisatta a kingdom. But what does a crow want with a kingdom? He gave it back. The king ordered that a measure of rice be cooked and served to the remaining crows of the city, while to the Bodhisatta he ordered a meal fit for a king. The Bodhisatta ate and drank. Bidding farewell to the king, he flew back to the forest cemetery, where he gathered about him all the crows of the forest, the villages and fields, as well as the crows of the city. He said to them, “See how one unguarded impulse, arising in the mind, causes much suffering for many?”

Then he spoke this verse:

*Quivering, wavering, this mind,
hard to guard, hard to protect.
The wise one makes it straight,
like the fletcher the arrow-shaft.*



This story is about many things, but probably most of all, it is about intention. What is intention? Where does it come from? On long retreats it is possible to slow down enough to notice subtle intentions, such as the impulse to turn and look for the source of a sound, or the impulse to stand, or reach. With such noticing we also see the potential for renunciation. We begin to see how noticing intention allows us to practice developing skillful attitudes of mind, rather than reinforcing our habitual patterns of liking and not-liking.

Throughout the story, characters act with specific intentions, aiming to achieve specific results. In most cases there is little or no awareness of what kinds of mental attitudes are being reinforced by following through with impulse. The first crow only wants to satisfy his urge to do mischief. The king's high-priest aims to satisfy his desire for revenge. The goat just wants to eat the rice, while the serving-girl, unable

to stay awake, wants to teach the goat a lesson he won't forget. The king wants his elephants to be healed. The Bodhisatta, learning of the slaughter of the crows, not only wishes to make it stop, he is willing to go to the root of the situation, where he exposes ignorance (the mistaken notion that crows have sufficient fat on their bodies to provide a healing salve for burns) and the truth, that the king's high-priest was motivated by anger to recommend crows' fat as a cure.

The Bodhisatta, alone of all the characters in the story, takes the time to examine his position *vis-a-vis* the situation. “Besides myself,” he says when he learns what is happening in the city, “there is no other who can cure my kinsmen of their fear.” Whereupon, he flies up into the branches of a Sal tree and reviews the ten perfections, asking himself how he wishes his actions to be guided. Because the foundation of his very life is his resolve to become a fully-awakened Buddha, the Bodhisatta's intentions are guided by awareness.

The story teaches this truth about the practice of awareness: that an entire life can be guided by a skillful intention, both from the perspective of the long view, and in the daily moments of our lives. The mind/heart (*citta*) is very much as the Buddha describes it in the Dhammapada. It quivers, it wavers. It resembles a fish thrown on dry land. Having a foundation of morality (*sīla*) and a practice of awareness is the ground from which skillful intentions can emerge. It is what allows us to make the mind straight (*uju*, with connotations of steadfast, upright, stable), like the fletcher the arrow-shaft.

Instructions to the reader: Stories offer strong medicine for healing. Let this one sit with you. See what images linger. Notice if the story speaks to you about some aspect of your own life. This, after all, is why stories like the Jātaka stay with us. They offer a direct teaching about the challenges and rewards of living an ethical life.

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