

# Crossing the Wilderness

## *the Apannaka Jataka Tale*



While the Buddha was staying at **Jeta-vana Monastery** near Sa-vat-thi, the wealthy banker, Anatha-pindi-ka, went one day to pay his respects. His servants carried masses of flowers, perfume, butter, oil, honey, molasses, cloths, and robes. Anatha-pindi-ka paid obeisance to the Buddha, presented the offerings he had

brought, and sat down respectfully. At that time, Anatha-pindi-ka was accompanied by five hundred friends who were followers of other, strange teachers. His friends also paid their respects to the Buddha and sat close to the banker. The Buddha's face appeared like a full moon, and his body was surrounded by a radiant aura. Seated on the red stone seat, he was like a young lion roaring with a clear, noble voice as he taught them a discourse full of sweetness and beautiful to the ear.

After hearing the Buddha's teaching, the five hundred gave up their strange practices and took refuge (shelter) in the **Triple Gems**: the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. After that, they went regularly with Anatha-pindi-ka to offer flowers and incense and to hear the teaching. They gave liberally, kept the rules, and faithfully observed the **Uposatha Day**. Soon after the Buddha left Sa-vat-thi to return to Raja-gaha, soon after however, these men abandoned their new faith and reverted to their previous beliefs.

**Uposatha Day.** A day of observance based on the traditional Buddhist calendar of new, full and quarter moons.

Seven or eight months later, the Buddha returned to Jeta-vana. Again, Anatha-pindi-ka brought these friends to visit the Buddha. They paid their respects, but Anatha-pindi-ka explained that they had given up their refuge in the **Triple Gems** and had resumed their original practices.

The Buddha asked, "Is it true that you have abandoned refuge in the Triple Gem for refuge in other doctrines?" The Buddha's voice was incredibly clear because throughout myriad aeons (countless ages) He had always spoken truthfully.

When these men heard it, they were unable to conceal the truth. "Yes, Blessed One," they confessed. "It is true."

"In forsaking such a refuge as this," he admonished them, "you have certainly erred. In the past, too, men who foolishly mistook what was no refuge for a real refuge, met disaster. Actually, they fell prey to **yak-shas** in the wilderness and were utterly destroyed. In contrast, men who clung to the truth not only survived, but actually prospered in that same wilderness."

Anatha-pindi-ka raised his clasped hands to his forehead, praised the Buddha, and asked him to tell that story of the past.

"In order to dispel the world's ignorance and to conquer suffering," the Buddha proclaimed, "I practiced the **Ten Perfections** for countless aeons. Listen carefully, and I will speak."



**Yak-shas.** Evil gnomes, in fact the bad influences of earth elementals.

Having their full attention, the Buddha made clear, as though he were releasing the full moon from behind clouds, what rebirth had concealed from them.

~

Long, long ago, when **Brahma-datta** was reigning in **Baranasi**, the **Bodhi-sattva** was born into a merchant's family and grew up to be a wise trader. At the same time, in the same city, there was another merchant, a very stupid fellow, with no common sense whatsoever.

One day it so happened that the two merchants each loaded five hundred carts with costly wares of Baranasi and prepared to leave in the same direction at exactly the same time. The wise merchant thought, "If this silly young fool travels with me and if our thousand carts stay together, it will be too much for the road. Finding wood and water for the men will be difficult, and there won't be enough grass for the oxen. Either he or I must go first."

"Look," he said to the other merchant, "the two of us can't travel together. Would you rather go first or follow after me?"



The foolish trader thought, "There will be many advantages if I take the lead. I'll get a road which is not yet cut up. My oxen will have the pick of the grass. My men will get the choicest wild herbs for curry. The water will be undisturbed. Best of all, I'll be able to fix my own price for bartering my goods." Considering all these advantages, he said, "I will go ahead of you, my friend."

The Bodhi-sattva was pleased to hear this because he saw many advantages in following after. He reasoned, "Those carts going first will level the road where it is rough, and I'll be able to travel along the road they have already smoothed. Their oxen will graze off the coarse old grass, and mine will pasture on the sweet young growth which will spring up in its place. My men will find fresh sweet herbs for curry where the old ones have been picked. Where there is no water, the first caravan will have to dig to supply themselves, and we'll be able to drink at the wells they have dug. Hagglng over prices is tiring work; he'll do the work, and I will be able to barter my wares at prices he has already fixed."

"Very well, my friend," he said, "please go first."

"I will," said the foolish merchant, and he yoked his carts and set out. After a while he came to the outskirts of a wilderness. He filled all of his huge water jars with water before setting out to cross the sixty **yojanas** of desert which lay before him.



**A yojana** is a measure of distance that was used in ancient India. A yojana is about 12 km. (Sanskrit: योजन)

The yak-sha who haunted that wilderness had been watching the caravan. When it had reached the middle, he used his magic power to conjure up a lovely carriage drawn by pure white young bulls. With a retinue of a dozen disguised yak-shas carrying swords and shields, he rode along in his carriage like a mighty lord. His hair and clothes were wet, and he had a wreath of blue lotuses and white lilies around his head. His attendants also were dripping wet and draped in garlands. Even the bulls' hooves and carriage wheels were muddy.

As the wind was blowing from the front, the merchant was riding at the head of his caravan to escape the dust. The yak-sha drew his carriage beside the merchant's and greeted him kindly. The merchant returned the greeting and moved his own carriage to one side to allow the carts to pass while he and the yak-sha chatted.

"We are on our way from Baranasi, sir," explained the merchant. "I see that your men are all wet and muddy and that you have lotuses and water lilies. Did it rain while you were on the road? Did you come across pools with lotuses and water lilies?"



"What do you mean?" the yak-sha exclaimed. "Over there is the dark-green streak of a jungle. Beyond that there is plenty of water. It is always raining there, and there are many lakes with lotuses and water lilies." Then, pretending to be interested in the merchant's business, he asked, "What do you have in these carts?"

"Expensive merchandise," answered the merchant.

"What is in this cart which seems so heavily laden?" the yak-sha asked as the last cart rolled by.

"That's full of water."

"You were wise to carry water with you this far, but there is no need for it now, since water is so abundant ahead. You could travel much faster and lighter without those heavy jars. You'd be better off breaking them and throwing the water away. Well, good day," he said suddenly, as he turned his carriage. "We must be on our way. We have stopped too long already." He rode away quickly with his men. As soon as they were out of sight, he turned and made his way back to his own city.

The merchant was so foolish that he followed the yak-sha's advice. He broke all the jars, without saving even a single cupful of water, and ordered the men to drive on quickly. Of course, they did not find any water, and they were soon exhausted from thirst. At sunset they drew their carts into a circle and tethered the oxen to the wheels, but there was no water for the weary animals. Without water, the men could not cook any rice either. They sank to the ground and fell asleep. As soon as night came, the yak-shas attacked, killing every single man and beast. The fiends devoured the flesh, leaving only the bones, and departed. Skeletons were strewn in every direction, but the five hundred carts stood with their loads untouched. Thus, the heedless young merchant was the sole cause of the destruction of the entire caravan.



Allowing six weeks to pass after the foolish trader had left, the Bodhi-sattva set out with his five hundred carts. When he reached the edge of the wilderness, he filled his water jars. Then he assembled his men and announced, "Let not so much as a handful of water be used without my permission. Furthermore, there are poisonous plants in this wilderness. Do not eat any leaf, flower, or fruit which you have never eaten before, without showing it to me first." Having thus carefully warned his men, he led the caravan into the wilderness.

When they had reached the middle of the wilderness, the **yak-sha** appeared on the path just as before. The merchant noticed his red eyes and fearless manner and suspected something strange. "I know there is no water in this desert," he said to himself.



"Furthermore, this stranger casts no shadow. He must be a **yak-sha**. He probably tricked the foolish merchant, but he doesn't realize how clever I am."

"Get out of here!" he shouted at the **yak-sha**. "We are men of business. We do not throw away our water before we see where more is to come from!"

Without saying any more, the **yak-sha** rode away.

As soon as the **yak-shas** had left, the merchant's men approached their leader and said, "Sir, those men were wearing lotuses and water lilies on their heads. Their clothes and hair were wringing wet. They told us that up ahead there is a thick forest where it is always raining. Let us throw away our water so that we can proceed quicker with lightened carts."

The merchant ordered a halt and summoned all his men. "Has any man among you ever heard before today," he asked, "that there was a lake or a pool in this wilderness?"

"No, sir," they answered. "It's known as the 'Waterless Desert.'"



"We have just been told by some strangers that it is raining in the forest just ahead. How far does a rain-wind carry?"

"A **yojana**, sir."

"Has any man here seen the top of even a single storm-cloud?"

"No, sir."

"How far off can you see a flash of lightning?"

"**Four or five yojanas**, sir."

"Has any man here seen a flash of lightning?"

"No, sir."

"How far off can a man hear a peal of thunder?"

"**Two or three yojanas**, sir."

"Has any man here heard a peal of thunder?"

"No, sir."

"Those were not men, but **yak-shas**," the wise merchant told his men.

"They are hoping that we will throw away our water. Then, when we are weak and faint, they will return to devour us. Since the young merchant who went before us was not a man of good sense, most likely he was fooled by them. We may expect to find his carts standing just as they were first loaded. We will probably see them today. Press on with all possible speed, without throwing away a drop of water!"

Just as the merchant had predicted, his caravan soon came upon the five hundred carts with the skeletons of men and oxen strewn in every direction. He ordered his men to arrange his carts in a fortified circle, to take care of the oxen, and to prepare an early supper for themselves. After the animals and men had all safely bedded down, the merchant and his foremen, swords in hand, stood guard all through the night.

At daybreak the merchant replaced his own weak carts for stronger ones and exchanged his own common goods for the most costly of the abandoned merchandise. When he arrived at his destination, he was able to barter his stock of wares at two or three times their value. He returned to his own city without losing a single man out of all his company.



~

This story ended, the Buddha said, "Thus it was, laymen, that in times past, the foolish came to utter destruction, while those who clung to the truth escaped from the yak-shas' hands, reached their goal in safety, and returned to their homes again.

"This clinging to the truth not only endows happiness even up to rebirth in the **Realm of Brahma**, but also leads ultimately to Arahant-ship. Following untruth entails rebirth either in the four states of punishment or in the lowest conditions of mankind." After the Buddha had expounded the Four Truths, those five hundred disciples were established in the Fruit of the First Path.

~

The Buddha concluded his lesson by identifying the Birth as follows: "The foolish young merchant was Deva-datta, and his men were Deva-datta's followers. The wise merchant's men were the followers of the Buddha, and I myself was that wise merchant."



*The End*