

THE KING OF HEAVEN (Mandhātu Jataka)

A very long time ago, there lived a king named Mandhāta. This king had done so many kind and generous deeds, or good karmas, in countless past lives that he had collected an unimaginable amount of merit. But instead of developing great compassion and offering the merit to help other beings, he focused on himself and what he liked. So, all his merit automatically gave him what he wanted – the greatest luxuries, wealth and power.

Since he was a young child, he lived as a wealthy prince with many palaces, advisors, servants, horses, elephants, gardens, musicians, entertainers, and weapons, and everything he wanted. When he became an adult, he ruled kingdoms along with other kings. And then after many years he became the supreme king, with power over all of the other kings. Everyone treated him with great respect and admiration, and praised all the good deeds he did.



Not only did he have the greatest wealth, power, success and popularity as a supreme king, but he also had supernatural powers. With one of his powers, when he made a fist with his left hand and touched it with his right hand, a stream of jewels flowed from his hand like rain onto the ground, covering it with seven different types of brilliant sparkling exquisite jewels.



One day, there was something that he wanted but he just couldn't get, no matter how much he tried. So he looked dissatisfied, quite unhappy. His advisors asked him,

“Why are you looking depressed, my lord?”

The king said, “When you consider the great power of my merit, what is this kingdom? There must be a better place. Which place seems really worth having?”

The advisors answered, “Heaven, my lord.”

The king had such great merit and power that he could travel along with his queens and advisors to the Heaven of the Four Great Kings, in something called the Wheel of Empire. When he arrived, the four kings, each of whom guarded one of the four directions – north, south, east and west – came to greet him along with other spirit beings from that heaven-world, offering heavenly flowers and perfumes.



They showed King Mandhāta their heaven-world and generously allowed him to rule over it. So, he happily ruled over this beautiful heaven-world for a long time.

It was interesting and entertaining, with many types of celestial beings with all kinds of supernatural powers, whom one doesn't ordinarily see on the Earth. There were musical spirits, tree spirits, river spirits, royal serpent spirits, and others. In that world, one doesn't experience the pain and suffering there that we experience here in the human world.

Although King Mandhāta had even more popularity, praise, comforts and entertainment there than on Earth, he still didn't feel satisfied. He began to look sick with boredom and discontent.

The four great kings asked him, "Mighty king, are you unsatisfied?"

King Mandhāta said, "What place is more lovely than this heaven?"

They answered, "My lord, we are like servants. The Heaven of the Thirty-three Gods is more lovely than this."

Indeed, the Heaven of the Four Great Kings is the lowest level of heaven, more like the human world than other heaven-worlds. The Heaven of the Thirty-three Gods is one level higher, where beings feel more joy. King Mandhāta set in motion the Wheel of Empire, gathered his queens and advisors around him and turned his face in the direction the four kings were pointing, to the Heaven of the Thirty-three Gods. Sakka was the king of the thirty-three gods in that realm. With heavenly flowers and perfumes, and with a big crowd of gods, he approached King Mandhāta and his group.



And he led them to the Heaven of the Thirty-three Gods. What a beautiful, delightful place! King Mandhāta saw that the beings there lived in exquisite mansions, better than anything he had seen on Earth.

Sakka was so kind and generous that he gave King Mandhāta half of his kingdom of Heaven. So, Sakka and King Mandhāta together ruled the Heaven of Thirty-three Gods. The two kings ruled happily for millions of years. Time in heaven-worlds lasts much longer than time on Earth, on which only a few days pass during the time that millions of years pass in the heaven-worlds. Finally, Sakka's merit that had earned him a long life in heaven expired, so he had to be born on Earth again to live as a human, and endure the suffering and unpleasantness that people experience on Earth.

Another being became the new Sakka, king of Heaven of the Thirty-three Gods, and he ruled together for millions of years with King Mandhāta. After the new Sakka's time in heaven expired and he was born on Earth, another being became the new Sakka, and he then ruled together with King Mandhāta. King Mandhāta ended up ruling together with a total of 36 different Sakka kings, one after the other.

During all these millions of years, King Mandhāta had a life full of heavenly pleasures, far more delightful than those on Earth. Yet as time went on, the force of his desire grew stronger and stronger. He would become bored after a while, so then he wanted something more, something better, or something new. And, he could get what he wanted. When everything he wanted was easily available, life became really boring. There was no challenge, no excitement, no victory or thrill after a difficult or painful experience. One day, he thought,

“What is only half a heavenly kingdom to me? I will kill Sakka and rule the kingdom alone.”

He tried and tried to kill Sakka, but he couldn't. Sakka could not be killed. And soon, King Mandhāta's negative karmas of desire and greed caused him to lose his power. He suddenly became very old. But he was still a human, so he couldn't just disintegrate in heaven. He had to come back to Earth to die. So, he fell from heaven into a park and lay on the ground.



A gardener saw him lying on the ground, and recognized him as the old King Mandhāta. Only a little time had passed on the Earth during the time the king ruled for millions of years in the heaven-worlds.

The gardener went to the palace to tell the royal family. They saw that the king was very old and weak, and knew he didn't have much longer to live.

They thought about asking the wise old king for some words of wisdom before he passed away. One of the people from the palace asked him,

“My lord, what words of advice can we receive from you?”

The old king said in a feeble voice, “Take from me this message to the people: Mandhāta, king of kings, having ruled supreme over the Earth, for a long time having ruled over the beings in the Heaven of the Four Great Kings, having been King of Heaven during the lifetimes of 36 Sakka kings, now lies here, dead.”

With these words, he died.

Many lifetimes later, the Buddha taught that King Mandhāta was a king ruling over countless beings for so many years, with all the wealth and luxuries of a king of heaven, yet he never could feel satisfied; he never felt content. Having desire is painful, feeling discontent is misery. The students of Buddha know this will always try to control their desires.

QUESTIONS:

1. What did King Mandhāta do in past lives to be born as a prince with so much wealth and power? (many good deeds, good karmas)
2. Did he offer his merit (the results of his good deeds) to help other beings? (no)
3. Rather than developing compassion and offering his merit to help other beings, what did he focus on? (himself and what he liked)
4. What was the name of the first heaven-world he went to? (Heaven of the Four Great Kings)
5. What was the name of the next heaven-world he went to? (Heaven of the 33 Gods)
6. How did he feel after ruling for a while as a king on Earth, the Heaven of the Four Great Kings, and the Heaven of the 33 Gods? (bored, dissatisfied)

DHARMA DISCUSSION – Contentment and Controlling Desires:

Although he could get almost everything he wanted, was King Mandhāta happy?

No, he always wanted something more – a better kingdom, more power. When he couldn't get something, or when he became bored, he was disappointed and unhappy.

What was the king's message to the people when he died?

Even if you get everything you want, you still must die.

But it wasn't just dying and death that he had to face.

What about all his selfishness, greed and the violence toward Sakka?

He would have to face the bad results of those negative karmas.

What does this story teach us about happiness? That happiness doesn't last; there is no ongoing satisfaction from getting what you want even if it were possible to get everything you want. There will always be some reason to be dissatisfied.

This demonstrates the first two of the Four Noble Truths taught by the Buddha. What are they?

- 1- that life is full of suffering (which includes unhappiness, pain, dissatisfaction, discomfort, and disappointment), and
- 2- that the cause of suffering is our desires (always wanting something, and being disappointed when we don't get what we want)

Try to think of a time when you got something that you really wanted. Before you got it, did you think, "If I just get this one thing, I'll be so happy"? How long after you got it did the happiness last? Even if it lasts a long time, the thrill of it fades over time. Did you worry about it getting lost, stolen or damaged? After you get it, maybe you want something that goes with it, or something that makes it even better, or you want to collect more of them. After a while, there is always something else that we really want. We see something that other people have, and we want it too. One desire leads to another, and then another, and it goes on and on. It's a never-ending cycle.

Sometimes when we feel unhappy or stressed, we might like to buy something that makes us feel better. Did you ever experience that? It feels good to shop for it, look forward to getting it, try it out, and show it to our friends. But if we do that too often, it can become an addiction! Similarly, some of us eat our favorite sweets when we feel unhappy or stressed. How do you feel when you have spent too much money, or when you eat too many sweets? You end up even more stressed or uncomfortable!

What can we do to control our desires? We should know the difference between what we want and what we need. When you buy or ask for something, think about whether you need it or whether you just want it. Ask yourself: Is it something you really need for learning, or doing your work, sport, art, or other constructive activity? Do you need it to replace something that is worn out, broken, lost or outgrown? Or is it just something that you want, for entertainment, for your friends to see, or because your friend has it, or just because you like it?

Just because it's something we want but don't really need doesn't mean we shouldn't have it.

But you should watch to make sure you don't let your desires get out of control; watch that you don't overdo it.

And, what if your parents don't agree to give it to you?

Respect their decision, and don't beg or get angry with them.

Is there some way that King Mandhāta could have felt more contentment, without always wanting something more?

Was there something he could have done with his immense amount of merit?

Yes. He could have offered his merit to other beings.

That means, after doing a good deed, prayers or meditation, wishing that the merit be shared with all beings for their peace and happiness.

When you share merit with other beings, you don't lose the good results, but you share it, making others happy, too.

For example, if you had a whole cake or box of ice cream, would you rather eat it alone all by yourself, or would you rather share it with others, eating together? When you share it, you see others smiling and enjoying it.

Isn't it a good feeling when you do something to make others happy?

If King Mandhāta had offered his merit to other beings rather than just being the big boss ruling over everyone, he would have enjoyed the feeling of making them happier, sharing his happiness with them, and having compassion for them.

Then he would have felt content. He wouldn't have been so greedy trying to get everything he wanted, and he wouldn't have tried to kill Sakka, which were negative karmas.

When we do something to make the world a better place, or to help others feel more happy and peaceful, that gives us real contentment, a deep satisfaction. Then it's much easier to control our desires.