

## The Prince of Paupers

The Buddha told this story about a past life of one of his students, an extraordinary young monk named Pandita who attained enlightenment—that is, he became an arahant—a few days after having become a monk at the young age of seven.

In that past life, Pandita was an extremely poor man known by the name of Mahaduggata, which means the Prince of Paupers, or the Prince of Poor People. He lived in the time of the previous buddha named Buddha Kassapa, long before the Buddha, known as Gautama Buddha or Shakyamuni Buddha, of our time.

Buddha Kassapa once traveled with thousands of his student monks to the holy city of Benares, also known as Varanasi, in northern India. The residents of the city presented them with offerings of food, medicines and other necessities. One day, at the end of a meal, Buddha Kassapa thanked the donors for the wonderful food they had prepared and gave the following Dharma teaching:

Lay disciples,<sup>1</sup> here in this world one man says to himself, “It is my bounden duty to give only that which is my own. Why should I urge others to give?” So, he himself gives alms, but does not urge others to give. That man, in his future lives, receives the blessing of wealth, but does not receive the blessing of popularity. Another man urges others to give, but does not himself give. That man receives in his future lives the blessing of popularity, but lives as an eater of remnants. Yet another man not only himself gives, but also urges others to give. That man, in his future lives, receives both the blessing of wealth and the blessing of popularity.

A man who stood there heard this and thought to himself, “I will act right away so I can get both blessings for myself.” So, bowing to the Buddha, he requested,

“Reverend sir, tomorrow, receive offerings from me.”

Kassapa Buddha asked, “How many monks do you wish me to bring?”

The man responded, “How many monks are in your group, reverend sir?”

“Twenty thousand monks,” Kassapa Buddha replied.

The man said, “Reverend sir, tomorrow bring all your monks and receive offerings from me.”

Kassapa Buddha accepted his invitation. The man went into the town and announced at a large gathering,

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<sup>1</sup> “Lay” means people who live with their families, in other words, people who are not monks. “Disciples” means students, or people who are his followers, who follow his teachings.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I have invited the Sangha of monks presided over by the Buddha to take a meal here tomorrow. Each and all of you give a meal to as many monks as you are able.”

Then he went around asking how many each family could provide for. Some responded, “We will supply food for ten monks,” others responded, “We will provide for twenty monks,” or “We will provide for a hundred,” and the wealthiest families responded, “We will provide for five hundred.” Each pledged to provide meals for as many monks as they could reasonably afford. The man wrote down the people’s names and number of monks on a leaf.

As he walked, the man came upon Mahaduggata, and said to him, “Sir Mahaduggata, I have invited the Sangha of monks presided over by the Buddha for tomorrow’s meal. Tomorrow the city residents will give offerings. How many monks will you provide for?”

Mahaduggata responded, “Sir, what have I to do with monks? Monks need rich men to provide for them. But as for me, I own not so much as a small measure of rice to make porridge tomorrow; what have I to do with monks?”

When the man heard the poor Mahaduggata plead his poverty as an excuse, instead of remaining silent, he said, “Sir Mahaduggata, there are many people in this city who live in luxury, eating rich food, wearing soft clothes, adorned with all manner of adornments, and sleeping in beds of royal splendor. But as for you, you work for your living and yet get scarcely enough to fill your belly. That being the case, doesn’t it seem likely that the reason why you yourself get nothing is that you have never done anything for others?”

Mahaduggata responded, “I think so, sir.”

The man suggested, “Well why do you not do a work of merit right now? You are young and you have plenty of strength; is it not your bounden duty while you are earning a living to give offerings according to your ability?”

As the man spoke, Mahaduggata was overcome with emotion and said, “Write my name on the leaf for one monk; no matter how little I earn, I will provide food for one monk.”

The man said to himself, “What is the use of writing one monk on the leaf?” and didn’t write down Mahaduggata’s name.

Mahaduggata went home and said to his wife, “Tomorrow, the residents of the city will provide food for the Sangha of monks. I also was requested to provide food for one monk; therefore, we also will provide food for one monk tomorrow.”

His wife, instead of saying “We are poor, why did you promise to do so?” said, “What you did was quite right. We are poor now because we have never given anything. We will both work for hire and give food for one monk.”

So, both of them went out into the city to look for work. A rich merchant saw Mahaduggata and asked, "Sir Mahaduggata, do you wish to work for hire?"

Mahaduggata replied, "Yes your honor."

"What kind of work can you do?" the merchant asked.

"Whatever you would like to have done," Mahaduggata said.

The merchant said, "Well then, we are going to host three hundred monks. Come, you can split some firewood."

He got an axe and a hatchet and handed them to him. Mahaduggata put on a thick back support belt and energetically began splitting the wood, tossing the axe aside and using the hatchet, and then later tossing the hatchet aside and using the axe.

The merchant said to him, "Sir, today you work with unusual energy. What is the reason for it?"

Mahaduggata replied, "Master, I expect to provide food for one monk."

The merchant was pleased with his response and thought to himself, "It is a difficult task this man has undertaken. Instead of remaining silent and refusing to give because of his poverty, he says, 'I will work for hire and provide food for one monk.'"

The merchant's wife saw Mahaduggata's wife and asked her, "Ma'am, what kind of work can you do?"

Mahaduggata's wife replied, "Whatever you wish to have done."

The merchant's wife took her into the room where the mortar and pestle for grinding grains and spices was kept, and set her to work grinding rice into porridge. Mahaduggata's wife grinded and sifted it with as much joy and pleasure as if she was dancing.

The merchant's wife asked her, "Ma'am, you seem to take unusual pleasure in doing your work; what is the reason for it?"

She replied, "Madam, with the wages we earn at this work we expect to provide food for one monk."

The merchant's wife was happy to hear this, and said to herself, "What a difficult task it is that this woman is doing!"

When Mahaduggata had finished splitting all the wood, the merchant gave him four measures of rice as pay for his work, plus four more as an expression of appreciation. The merchant's wife

paid Mahaduggata's wife a cup of ghee (clarified butter), a container of yogurt, an assortment of relishes, and a measure of rice.

Filled with joy at the thought that they had received so much food to donate as offerings to a monk, the couple woke up early in the morning. Mahaduggata's wife said to him,

"Go get some leaves for curry and bring them home."

He went to a shop, and finding no curry leaves there, he went to the bank of the river and plucked leaves, singing for joy at the thought, "Today I shall have the privilege of giving food to the noble monks."

A fisherman standing nearby, who had just thrown his big net into the water, thought to himself, "That must be the voice of Mahaduggata." So, he called him over and asked,

"You sing as though you were overjoyed at heart; what is the reason?"

"I am picking up leaves, friend," Mahaduggata answered.

"What are you going to do?" the fisherman asked.

"I'm going to provide food for one monk!" Mahaduggata replied.

"Happy indeed will be the monk who shall eat your leaves!" the fisherman said.

Mahaduggata said, "What else can I do, master? I intend to provide for him with the leaves I have myself gathered."

The fisherman said, "Well then, come here."

"What do wish me to do, master?" asked Mahaduggata.

"Take these fish and tie them up in bundles for some coins."

Mahaduggata did as he was told, and the residents of the city bought them so they could be offered to the monks who they would be hosting. He was still tying up bundles of fish when the time came for the monks to walk to the houses to receive food, so he said to the fisherman,

"I must go now, friend. It's time for the monks to come."

The fisherman asked, "Are there any bundles of fish left?"

"No, friend, they're all sold," was the reply.

The fisherman said, "Well then, there are four redfish which I buried in the sand for my own use. If you intend to provide food for the monks, take them with you."

Meanwhile, Buddha Kassapa, as he surveyed the world very early that morning, observed Mahaduggata, and thought, "What is going to happen? Yesterday Mahaduggata and his wife worked for hire so they could provide food for one monk. Which monk will he get?" And he came to the conclusion, "The city residents will host monks in their houses according to the names written on the leaf; no other monk will Mahaduggata get, but only me." The buddhas are said to show particular tenderness to poor people. Buddha Kassapa said to himself, "I will give my blessings to Mahaduggata." He went into his meditation room, which was called the Perfumed Chamber.

When Mahaduggata went into his house with the fish and leaves, the throne of Sakka, the king of the Heaven of Thirty-Three Gods, started heating up, which occurs when some great virtuous event is about to happen in the human world. He looked around and said to himself, "What can be the reason for this?" And he thought, "Yesterday, Mahaduggata and his wife worked for hire so they could provide food for one monk. Which monk will he get?" He came to the conclusion, "Mahaduggata will obtain no other monk than the Buddha, who is sitting in the Perfumed Chamber with this thought in his mind, 'I will give my blessings to Mahaduggata.' Now it is Mahaduggata's intention to offer a meal that he has himself made to the Buddha, consisting of porridge and rice and leaf-curry. What if I go to Mahaduggata's house and offer to act as cook?"

Sakka disguised himself as an ordinary man, went near Mahaduggata's house and asked, "Would anyone like to hire a man to work for him?"

Mahaduggata saw him and asked, "Sir, what kind of work can you do?"

Sakka said, "Master, I am a man of all work; there is nothing I do not know how to do. Among other things, I know how to cook porridge and boil rice."

Mahaduggata said, "Sir, we need your services, but we have no money to pay you."

"What work is it you have to do?" asked Sakka.

"I wish to provide food for one monk and I would like to have someone prepare the porridge and rice," Mahaduggata replied.

Sakka said, "If you intend to provide food for a monk, it won't be necessary for you to pay me. Is it not proper that I should perform a work of merit?"

"If that is the case, then very well sir, come in," Mahaduggata invited.

Sakka entered the poor man's house and had him bring the rice and other foods, and then told him to go and bring the monk who was designated for him to serve.

The man who had gathered all the pledges had sent monks to the houses of the city residents according to the names on the leaf. Mahaduggata met him and said, "Give me the monk designated for me."

The man immediately remembered what he had done and replied, "I forgot to allot you a monk."

Mahaduggata felt as if a sharp dagger had been plunged into his belly, and he said, "Sir, why are you ruining me? Yesterday you urged me to give an offering. So my wife and I worked all day for hire, and today I got up early in the morning to gather leaves, went to the bank of the river and spent the morning picking up leaves. Give me one monk!" He wrung his hands and burst into tears.

People gathered near them and asked, "What's the matter, Mahaduggata?"

He told them what had happened, and they asked the man, "Is it true, as this man alleges, that you urged him to hire himself out for service to provide food for a monk?"

"Yes, noble sirs," the man replied.

They responded, "You have done a grave wrong in that, while making arrangements for so many monks, you failed to allot this man a single monk."

The man was troubled by what they said, and told Mahaduggata, "Do not ruin me. You are putting me to great inconvenience. The residents have taken to their houses the monks allotted to them according to the names written on the leaf, and there is no monk in my own house whom I can take away and give to you. But the Teacher, the Buddha, is even now sitting in the Perfumed Chamber, having just washed his face, and outside the Chamber are sitting kings, royal princes, commanders-in-chief, and others, waiting for him to come out, so they can take his bowl and accompany him on his way. The buddhas usually show particular compassion to a poor man. Therefore, go to the monastery, bow to him and say, 'I am a poor man, reverend sir. Bestow your blessings on me.' If you have merit, you will undoubtedly obtain what you seek."

So, Mahaduggata went to the monastery. Whenever he had gone there before, he had gone as one of the poor people to eat the leftover food offered to the poor. Therefore, kings, princes and others assumed he came there expecting to eat. They said,

"Mahaduggata, this is not meal time. Why do you come here?"

"Sirs," he replied, "I know it's not meal time but I have come to pay respect to the Teacher."

Then he went to the Perfumed Chamber and bowed, laying his head on the threshold, and said, "Reverend sir, in this city there is no man poorer than I. Be my refuge, bestow your blessings on me."

Kassapa Buddha opened the door of the Perfumed Chamber, took down his bowl, and placed it in the poor man's hands. Mahaduggata's joy was as if he had received the glory of the King of the World! Kings, royal princes, and others gasped at each other. When the Buddha presents his bowl to a man, no one would dare to grab it away from him. But they wanted to have the Buddha's bowl and tried to persuade Mahaduggata to give it to them.

Some said, "Sir Mahaduggata, give us the Teacher's bowl; we will give you all this money for it. You are a poor man, take the money. What need do you have of a bowl?"

Mahaduggata replied, "I will give it to no one. I have no need of money; all that I desire is to provide food for the Teacher."

All the others in the crowd pleaded and begged for Mahaduggata to give them the bowl. He wouldn't give it to them, so they gave up.

The king thought to himself, "Money will not tempt Mahaduggata to give up the bowl, and no one can take from him the bowl which the Teacher has given him of his own free will. But how much will this man's offerings amount to? When the time comes for him to present his offerings, I will take the Teacher aside, lead him to my house, and give him the food I have made ready." This was the thought in his mind even as he walked along with the Buddha.

Meanwhile, Sakka, the King of the Heaven of the Thirty-Three Gods, prepared porridge, rice, leaf-curry, and other kinds of food, made ready a seat appropriate for the Buddha, and sat down awaiting his arrival. Mahaduggata led the Teacher to his house and invited him to enter, and Kassapa Buddha sat on the seat prepared by Sakka.

The King of Benares then said to Mahaduggata, "Sir, when we begged you to give us the Teacher's bowl, you refused to do so. Now let us see what sort of offerings you have prepared for the Teacher."

At that moment, Sakka uncovered the dishes and showed the rice, porridge, and other kinds of food. The fragrance arising from the food was so inviting! The king looked at all the perfectly prepared foods, and said to the Buddha,

"Reverend Sir, when I came here, I thought to myself, 'How much will Mahaduggata's offerings amount to? When he presents them, I will take the Teacher aside, lead him to my house, and give him the food I have myself prepared. But as a matter of fact, I have never seen such a meal offering as this. If I remain here, Mahaduggata will be annoyed; therefore, I will depart.'"

And, bowing to the Buddha, he left. Sakka presented the porridge and other food to the Teacher and faithfully took care of him. After the Buddha had eaten his meal, he spoke words of thanks and appreciation, got up from his seat, and left. Sakka made a signal to Mahaduggata, who then took the Teacher's bowl and walked with him.

Sakka turned back, stopped at the door of Mahaduggata's house, and saw that Mahaduggata's house was filled with jewels. Everyone in the house, including the children, then walked out of the house and stood there, in shock. When Mahaduggata returned, he wondered why his family was standing outside, and when he saw the jewels, he wondered what he himself would do with all those jewels. He thought, "Today I have received the reward of the offerings I have given." He then went to the king and offered him all the jewels. The king thought, "This very day, the offerings given to the Buddhas have reached their result," and sent carts to Mahaduggata's house, to be filled with the jewels.

The king called for the citizens of the city to assemble, and asked them, "Is there anyone in this city who has as much wealth as the value of these jewels?"

They replied, "There is not anyone, your majesty."

"What ought to be done for a man of so much wealth as this?" the king asked.

"He should be given the job of treasurer, your majesty," they replied.

The king bestowed the high honor of serving as treasurer on Mahaduggata.

#### *Dharma Discussion – Poverty and Generosity:*

Interestingly, this story involves an ancient buddha, the Buddha Kassapa. What do we know about him? Very little, actually. We don't even know which years he lived. But historical facts are not the focus of the Buddha's teachings; he tells stories for us to learn, understand and practice the teaching illustrated by the story so we can experience for ourselves—to see for ourselves—the results of practice and the truth of his teaching. Since ancient times, across all cultures, stories have been a universal way to teach and an easy way to remember important teachings. This story gives an illustration of the Buddha's teaching on generosity and how it relates to poverty.

In Buddhism, there is a lot of emphasis on generosity. Why is this so? There are several reasons. To begin with, anyone can generate merit by generosity—there are infinite ways to do it—and merit is the cause of a peaceful, happy life. What is merit? It's the same as good karma—an action that is the cause for a good result. It's like the energy, goodness or seed from a good deed or a kind action, that will eventually ripen as pleasant experience or fortunate circumstance in our future or in a future life. Karma and rebirth (sometimes called reincarnation) are central concepts in Buddhism. When the Buddha attained enlightenment



under the Bodhi Tree, he saw how different kinds of karma resulted in various types of rebirths in heavenly, human, animal, ghost, and hell worlds: many good karmas resulted in birth as a human in fortunate circumstances or birth in a heaven world, and many negative karmas, or harmful deeds, resulted in birth as a human in unfortunate circumstances or birth in the other worlds.

In the beginning of the story, what did the Buddha teach the audience about karma? That the good action we do comes back to us as a similar type of result: giving away wealth results in receiving wealth, and reaching out to other people in a virtuous way results in other people reaching out to us in a good way. We can think of it as somewhat similar to a boomerang—what we give out, we get back. Or we can think of it as Isaac Newton’s Third Law, that for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction.

But usually we don’t see “instant karma.” We don’t see that people receive some stroke of luck or rewarding experience soon after doing a good deed, or an unlucky experience soon after doing something harmful. Sometimes, the opposite happens. The boomerang doesn’t come right back to us. That is because karma often ripens later, maybe lifetimes later. Karmic results usually are not immediate. But, the more good actions we do, the more likely some of them will ripen soon, so that we see good results.

What does the story tell us about the results of making offerings to the Buddha? Did Mahaduggata experience an equal and opposite reaction? For his offering of food to the Buddha, did he receive an equal amount of food? No, he received enormous wealth in jewels and therefore was appointed as the king’s treasurer, so he and his family would be very wealthy and respected for the rest of their lives. So, the Buddha taught us that offerings to him are magnified many times over.

What does the story tell us about being poor, having barely enough money to survive, not having anything to offer in generosity?

It tells us that being poor is the result of not having been generous in past lives.

And that even without money, one can be generous, which then generates wealth.

As a young person you might not have much money or items to offer to others, and you may be very busy, with very little free time.

But, generosity doesn’t mean only offering food, money, or things of value.

It also means volunteering time, effort, or skills to help others; giving up a bit of free time to be helpful or do something kind for others.

Sakka in the story volunteered to cook in order to gain merit.

Mahaduggata and his wife managed to be generous by doing some work, some service, to earn something to offer.

You can help others in all kinds of ways, wherever you find an opportunity to help, using only a few minutes or a moment of your time.

When you are more aware of finding opportunities to be generous by helping others and doing good deeds, you will find more and more varieties of ways to do so, and this develops a habit of being helpful wherever you are, generating more and more merit.

You likely will find it uplifting to help others, as you think less about your worries while you are focusing on others. You might even find a lot of joy in volunteering!

You can even practice generosity in your mind! You can do this by rejoicing in the merit of others. How do you do it? When you see someone being generous, making an offering, or doing some other kind act, you can simply feel glad that the person is doing something good to make the world a better place in some way.

Or, you can mentally join in while someone makes an offering, imagining you also are making the offering. In temples, this is done by the person who brought the items giving them to others to place on the shrine or to the monks, or offering the items for others to touch with their hands as a gesture of making an offering together with the others.

A more advanced way to practice generosity in your mind is to imagine things that you would like to have, and then imagine that you offer them to others, or to the Buddha. If you see something beautiful—for example a flower or a horse—imagine offering it to the Buddha.

Acts of generosity help relieve us of our greed for, and attachment to, things in this world. And this reduces our stress when we can't have them, and stress in striving to obtain them.

So, generosity is important not only as a way to generate merit, including wealth, but also as a method of overcoming our greed and attachment, as an antidote to our afflictions of greed and attachment. Does this seem paradoxical? It isn't when we consider that we need a basic level of wealth to have a stable and healthy life—where we have a safe environment, adequate place to live, nutrition and health care—which supports our ability to learn, concentrate, and practice the Dharma. And when we have more wealth than we need, we are in a better position to help others, and to support meritorious activities of others. Having a lot of wealth is only a problem when it's gained in ways that are unfair or harmful to ourselves or other beings, or when we are too attached to it or too greedy for it, when it makes us stressed or restless.

Now that the Buddha is no longer living on Earth, is there anything else we can do to magnify the results of our good actions, our good karmas?

The amount of merit earned by a good deed depends on our intent, our motivation for doing it. When we're generous to friends, family members and others, we usually we have some motivation of self-interest—we expect appreciation, gratitude or some kind of reciprocation.

Maybe you have made offerings to monks. Think about the motivation for doing so.

Some people do it because their family does it, because it's expected when you visit temples, or because they like others to see that they are supporting monks. In other words, the motivation is to gain others' approval or to conform with social norms.

Many people think of the reward from a good deed that they would like in the future, such as wealth or popularity, like the man in the story who gathered pledges of offerings from the people in his village. This is a strong motivator! It encourages us to build up good karma, which leads us forward along the path of the Dharma towards enlightenment.

But, motivation that goes beyond self-interest, beyond our worldly interests, that is, a selfless motivation to help others, gathers even more merit.

Selfless generosity is giving with “no strings attached,” that is, no attachment, no expectation, no hope of anything in return.

Generosity to Buddhist monks is similar to offering to the Buddha—the merit is multiplied. The way to make offerings to monks is not to offer to individual monks, but, while physically offering to individual monks, to mentally offer to the Sangha, the whole community of noble monastics and enlightened Buddhist practitioners of all times—past, present and future. Our motivation is to support the Sangha as a whole, so they can continue living as monks to preserve the teachings of the Buddha, and so that as many beings as possible can learn and practice the Dharma, purify their minds, and make the world a better place for everyone. This greatly magnifies the good results of our offerings!

What if we think a monk is not very inspiring or disciplined?

The Buddha mentioned that in the future there would be “yellow-neck” monks, which means false monks, but that we should still make offerings to them.

We might wonder, why we should support them? Because we, and others, still make great merit by offering to a monk as a symbol of the Sangha as a whole.

It’s our intent and motivation that matters—our strong, focused thoughts are like energy that creates effects.

Also, consider that the monk may inspire other people, or perhaps being a monk helps him live a more virtuous life than if he was not a monk.

There’s no need to be discouraged, because there are many monks living today who are truly dedicated to practicing the Dharma, who exemplify the noble Sangha by their wisdom, tranquility, compassion and discipline.

Finally, another way to be generous, and to magnify the results of our good karmas, is to dedicate the merit after we do a good deed, or at the end of our day.

That is, we share the merits of our actions. How do we do this?

By simply stating your intent, wishing “May the merit of the good deeds be shared with all beings, so they may be peaceful and happy.”

We can also share our merits with particular individuals, such as those who are undergoing difficulties, or our departed relatives.

We don’t lose any of our merits by sharing them; instead, due to our selfless and generous motivation, we gain more merit by the act of sharing it!