

SNAKE TALES (Veluka Jataka and Khandha Vatta Jataka)

There was once a young man who was a Bodhisattva, which means that in a future life would be the Buddha. He decided to give up family and worldly life and become an ascetic, a yogi who lives without many belongings and focuses his life on meditation. After practicing meditation in the Himalaya mountains for several years, he attained wisdom and knowledge to share with others, and after some time he had 500 student yogis living with him.

One evening, a young poisonous viper was slithering along and came to the hut of one of the student yogis.



When the yogi saw the little snake, he thought it looked beautiful and he wanted to take care of it as if it was his own child. So he adopted the viper to be his special pet. He took some bamboo and formed it into a cage to be a home for the snake. He was very kind and gentle to the young reptile, speaking to it in a sweet, loving voice.

The yogis began to call the pet snake “Bamboo” because he lived in a cage made of bamboo. Because the yogi loved his snake as if it was his own child, the other

yogis called him “Bamboo’s Father.”

After some days, the Bodhisattva heard about the student yogi and his pet snake, and requested the student to come and meet with him. The Bodhisattva asked,

“Is it true that you are keeping a viper as a pet?”

The student admitted it was true.

The Bodhisattva said, “A viper can never be trusted. Don’t keep it any longer.”

“But,” said the student, “my viper is as dear to me as a student is to a teacher. I couldn’t live without him.”

“Well then,” responded the Bodhisattva, “know that this very snake will make you lose your life.”



The student heard his master’s warning, but he just couldn’t part with his dear pet snake. Anyway, he couldn’t bear to part with it right away. He loved his pet, and he was sure his snake, which was still quite young and small, would never do anything to harm him.

He fed the little viper small mice and lizards, gave it water and kept it safe, making it happy and comfortable. It

stayed in the bamboo cage, and the student thought that maybe on another day he would let it go. But definitely not yet.

A few days later, all the students went out to gather fruits. They arrived at a spot where many types of fruits grew in plenty, so they decided to stop there and pick fruits to bring back to the monastery.

They enjoyed tasting all the different kinds of mangoes, bananas, papayas, and other sweet fruits. They stayed there for two or three days, climbing trees to get the best fruits and loading up baskets with each kind of fruit. Bamboo’s Father was with them, having left his pet safely in the bamboo cage near his hut while he was gone.

When he returned, he thought his pet may be hungry. He opened the bamboo cage to feed him and stretched out his hand, saying,

“Come, my son, you must be hungry.”



But the viper was angry that he had to wait so long without any food, and bit the student's outstretched hand, killing him on the spot.

Then the viper made his escape into the forest. The other yogis soon found the student's body lying near the bamboo cage. They told the Bodhisattva, who taught

them,

"The stubborn man, like Bamboo's Father, who doesn't follow the kind advice of his friends, will lose everything." This is the end of the first story.

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The Buddha told another story about love toward snakes after one of his monks had been sitting at his living room door chopping sticks and a snake crawled out of a rotten log and bit his toe, killing him right then and there. While the other monks were talking about it, the Buddha walked in and said,

"Friends, if our brother had practiced kindness toward the four royal races of snakes, that snake would not have bitten him. Wise yogis of long ago, by having kindness toward these snakes, had no more fear of them."

Then the Buddha told the story about another previous life as an ascetic. In that life, when the Bodhisattva left his home as a young man to practice meditation, he met some other ascetics, so he built a monastery near the shore of the Ganga River at the base of the Himalaya mountains. There, he and all the other yogis could meditate peacefully, sheltered from the rain and sun and protected from wild animals. His meditation practice was going well, and after some time, he developed some supernatural powers.

At that time there were many kinds of snakes at the shore of the river. Some of them, such as cobras, vipers, and kraits, were poisonous.



The krait, which likes to live near rivers but occasionally likes to go inside buildings, has the most powerful venom and is the most likely to bite people. It can be over six feet long. It is active at night, and is known for biting people while they are sleeping, or when a person doesn't see it and moves too close to it. Its bite doesn't

hurt much, and often feels like a mosquito or ant bite, so a person often doesn't know he was bitten.



The king cobra, which lives in the jungles all over India, are the world's longest poisonous snake, growing to up to 18 feet long!

When a long one raises its head up, its head can be four feet or more up from the ground and can look an adult person in the eye!



The smaller Indian cobra grows up to five feet long. They are the species that snake charmers use to entertain people.

It can spit venom from its fangs to three feet away, which can cause blindness if the venom gets in the eyes of a person or animal.



Vipers can be very aggressive and can be difficult to see in the weeds and underbrush, so people sometimes step on them and get bitten.

There were other types of poisonous snakes too. The yogis were very mindful and tried to avoid the snakes, but there were so many of them that they were difficult

to avoid. Many of the yogis got bitten, and some of them died from the bite.

Some of the yogis went to the Bodhisattva to discuss this terrible problem of deadly snakes. He called all the yogis to a meeting so all of them would hear his advice. Once they were all assembled at the meeting, he talked about the snakebite incidents and said,



“If you showed lovingkindness to the four royal races of snakes, none of them would bite you.

Therefore, from this time forward, you must practice lovingkindness to all the snakes.”

He told them to how to practice lovingkindness, by opening their hearts with love and chanting these verses:

“May I have lovingkindness to the Virupakkha snakes,
May I have lovingkindness to the Erapatha snakes,
May I have lovingkindness to the Chabbyaputta snakes,
May I have lovingkindness to the Kanhagotama snakes.”

He advised them further, "If you can have lovingkindness toward all snakes, then no snake will bite you or do you any harm." And he instructed them to chant:

"May I have lovingkindness toward those with no feet,
May I have lovingkindness toward those with two feet,
May I have lovingkindness toward those with four feet,
May I have lovingkindness toward those with many feet,

May those with no feet do me no harm,
May those with two feet do me no harm,
May those with four feet do me no harm,
May those with many feet do me no harm,

All beings, all living creatures,
May they all be happy and peaceful,
And may no harm come to them."

In this way, the Bodhisattva showed how to show lovingkindness to all creatures without any difference of feeling about them, without loving only some and ignoring or hating others. We must have the same lovingkindness for all those with no feet such as worms and snakes; all those with two feet such as kind people, unkind people, birds, bats, and monkeys; all those with four feet such as cows, dogs, rats, turtles, toads and lizards; and all those with many feet such as centipedes, insects, spiders, scorpions and crabs.

Although there was no living Buddha on the earth at that time, he taught them about a Buddha that lived before. He said, "The Buddha's power has no limit, the power of his teachings (the Dharma) has no limit, and the power of his followers (the Sangha) have no limit. Remember this infinite power of the Three Jewels: the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. On the other hand, all creatures that creep on the Earth - snakes, scorpions, centipedes, spiders, lizards and mice - have limited power, only a small amount of power."

He explained, "The greed and hatred in these creatures are the qualities that limit their power. Let us be protected night and day against these limited beings by the power of the Three Jewels, which have ultimate power with no limit. Remember the value of the Three Jewels."

Then he advised them to chant another verse:

“Now I am guarded and safe, with a wall of protection around me;
Now let all creatures leave me in peace.
I honor the Buddha,
and all the seven Buddhas who lived before.”

The yogis kept in mind the Bodhisattva’s advice, developed their lovingkindness, and remembered the virtues and power of the Buddha. And then all the snakes left the area, leaving the yogis in peace.

QUESTIONS:

1. What did the Bodhisattva tell Bamboo’s Father about the viper? (it can’t be trusted and it will cause him to lose his life)
2. After the Bodhisattva said that, why didn’t Bamboo’s Father let the snake go right away? (he loved the snake and didn’t think it would harm him)
3. What did the Bodhisattva tell the ascetics to do to avoid being bitten by snakes? (practice lovingkindness toward all snakes)
4. To which other creatures did the Bodhisattva tell them to practice lovingkindness? (all living creatures)
5. What did he teach about how much power the Buddha has (and the Three Jewels)? (there is no limit to his power)
6. What did he teach about how much power creatures such as snakes, scorpions and spiders have? (it is limited)

DHARMA DISCUSSION – Fear and Love:

Why wasn’t Bamboo’s Father afraid of being bitten by his snake?
He thought he was so kind and loving to his pet that it wouldn’t harm him.
Do you think that if you are kind and loving to someone, he will never harm you?

No. We all learn sooner or later that being kind to someone doesn't mean they always will be nice to us in return.

They might even hurt us very badly.

Similarly, Bamboo's Father was so kind to his pet, but it bit him.

So, why would the Bodhisattva teach that practicing lovingkindness toward snakes will prevent them from biting us?

To answer that, think about the way Bamboo's Father showed lovingkindness toward his pet. How did he do that?

By feeding it and keeping it in a cage.

He had love for his pet only. And he kept his pet for himself to enjoy.

That is called love *with attachment*.

When we love someone with attachment, it means we are attached to what we can get from that love. We are attached to him because he says and does things that give us happiness, he entertains us, he makes us feel special, appreciated and important.

Is that the kind of lovingkindness that the Bodhisattva taught us to practice?

No. What he taught was lovingkindness *without* attachment.

That means we love others without expecting love or anything in return.

We love other beings only for their well-being, even if we get no benefit, no special attention, nothing in return.

And he taught us to have that lovingkindness toward all, without judging, without thinking about who deserves it, who we prefer, or who we like best.

How can we have lovingkindness toward all beings, even those that are awful?

The Bodhisattva specifically mentioned creatures that we might think are awful: snakes, scorpions, and spiders.

It's difficult to love them. Why? Because they may harm us. We're afraid of them.

When we are full of fear, can we be full of love? Not really.

When we have fear, it's difficult to have love.

But we can train ourselves to love them. How?

By reciting the verses in the story or another lovingkindness prayer, meditating on lovingkindness to all beings, and just remembering to have lovingkindness whenever we start to think some creature is awful.

Then our love overcomes our fear, so our fear fades away, like when there is light, darkness fades away.

But that doesn't mean we shouldn't take precautions and protect ourselves! We can have lovingkindness from a distance - not touch it or get close to it. For example, if we train ourselves to love a spider, scorpion, or snake, we may start to notice how interesting or even how cute it looks. And we can remember that it bites not because it's evil but because it feels threatened or afraid.

What about lovingkindness toward people - how can we have lovingkindness toward people who are awful – who are cruel, bullies, destructive or full of hate?

We can remember that bad behavior and negative emotions means that they are hurting inside and they will suffer from the results of their karmas. In some situations, we can be friendly and kind to them, setting a good example.

But it's usually best to try to stay away from them.

In the first story, the Bodhisattva specifically told the student to stay away from the dangerous creature, not to keep the snake.

In the second story, he said to have lovingkindness, but from a distance. He didn't advise getting near the snakes.

He knew that practicing lovingkindness toward all beings creates a lot of merit, and that merit is a protection from harm.

And indeed, what happened when the yogis practiced lovingkindness?

The snakes left the area, so the yogis were no longer harmed by snakes.

How can we have lovingkindness from a distance toward people with terrible behavior?

We can do prayers, chanting, and meditation on lovingkindness, but how can we actually have lovingkindness toward those people?

Imagine a bunch of puppies, and some of the puppies are cuddly and cute. But one growls and barks loudly at you, and another one nips your hand when you reach to pet him.

You love them all, and you don't hate any of them just because they do something offensive.

They are ignorant of the rules of being a good pet; they need a peaceful environment, training, and discipline; they need to learn the rules.

You hope that they will become well behaved after they learn.

Similarly, people who misbehave are ignorant of the rules of Dharma.

Like puppies, what do they need?

They need a peaceful environment and they need to learn the rules, even if they already are adults.

We hope that they learn the rules of Dharma so they lose their ignorance, their negative emotions, and awaken themselves to their real nature, which is kind and loving.

So, we can practice lovingkindness toward them by wishing that they be happy, peaceful and quickly learn how to be a good person.

Then they would stop harming others.

When we practice like that, then we reduce our own negative emotions of fear, anger and hatred toward them.