



The Deer King of the Banyan

Indian Buddhism

In one of his previous incarnations, the Buddha incarnated in the form of a deer in a forest near Kashi, which later received the name of Varanasi or Benares. Over the years, he grew into a beautiful, golden stag. His eyes shone like two stars, his mouth was as red as the forest berries. His hooves were black and as bright as night in the Thar desert, and everyone who saw him said that his antlers were made of silver. Besides being beautiful, this golden deer was also compassionate and just. So much so, that he became the king of a herd of five hundred deer, the Herd of the Banyan.

In the same forest there was another herd of deer that was equally numerous, the Herd of the Antlers, and their king was likewise a noble, beautiful and impressive golden deer.

Around that time, Brahmadata was crowned king of Kashi. Brahmadata was a man of good heart, but he had regrettable tastes in pursuits. He liked to hunt. Obviously, a king, did not need to hunt for survival; instead, Brahmadata hunted for pleasure. In addition, he loved venison above all other foods, as you can imagine, this combination of interests did not bode well for the herds of deer who lived in the forest near Kashi.

Brahmadatta went out almost every day to hunt, starting each time from a different village. The people of the villages were thus obliged to set aside their own work in order to accompany and serve the king and his hunting parties.

The people of the villages began to get frustrated with the number of interruptions the king was subjecting them to. The farmers could not take care of their fields, so the crops were harvested haphazardly and later than they should be. The merchants and traders did not have the time to take care of their businesses properly. So the people from all the villages gathered together and decided to build a big deer park for the king next to Kashi. That way, they thought, the king could easily hunt any time he wished, and he would not need to recruit villagers to help him.

No sooner said than done, the peasants built a high palisade around a large meadow dotted with dense groves of trees and bushes. and they dug ponds where the deer could drink and bathe. They opened the large door in the palisade and, banging sticks and poles to create a deafening noise, they drove the deer out of the forest and into the park. When the last deer had gone through, the door was closed.

The representative of the villages went to visit the king and said:

‘Your Majesty, as you know, we have always been willing to help your hunting parties, but our fields and businesses are increasingly neglected because of this, and we have families to feed. We know that you are a wise king and that, consequently, you will know how to value what we have created for you. We have made you a nice deer park next to the city, in which we have gathered two big herds for your enjoyment. Now, you can go hunting whenever you want to, without needing to recruit villagers for each outing. Days that you do not go out hunting, you can still have fresh venison, because your own cooks will be able to kill all the meat they need.’

The king, who was not a bad man, understood perfectly the problem brought to him by the peasants and merchants of the villages, and agreed to their initiative.

The following day, Brahmadata went to the park and was pleased to see so many deer roaming the grounds. It did not take him long to discern two golden stags of impressive stature, which he supposed to be the kings of the herds. Brahmadata pointed them out to his assistant, the chief of the guard and his cook giving the order that those two deer should not be slaughtered under any circumstances.

Every day, Brahmadata came to the park and killed a deer, which was taken by the cook to prepare dishes for the king's table. Sometimes, if the king was very busy, it was the cook himself who gave the order to the chief of the guard to kill a deer.

But as soon as the deer saw the bows and arrows, they panicked. They ran from here to there, they crashed against trees or got caught between them, hooking their antlers and wounding themselves, twisting their legs and breaking bones with the falls. Others were injured by the loose arrows.

The king of the Banyan Herd was saddened by all the injuries, deaths and panic, so he went to see the king of the Antlers Herd.

'It is clear that we are trapped here, at least for the moment,' the Banyan Stag said, 'We may have to face this unfortunate situation for a while. But we should, at least, try to reduce the suffering of everyone as much as possible.'

'I agree,' said the Antlers Stag. 'I have also been thinking about this, but I do not know what we can do.'

'Well,' the Banyan Deer said. 'I thought something that, although it is very hard to accept, could at least limit the damage to the rest of the deer in both herds. Since the human king only needs the meat of one deer a day, I suggest that one of us could be chosen by lot each day, and that deer should go directly to king Brahmadata to be killed, or to the chopping block to be sacrificed by the cook. One day we would choose one of my herd, and the next day a deer of yours. In this way, we would avoid the chaos and mad racing that causes so many injuries and wounds.'

'I agree with your proposal,' the Stag of the Antlers said, and addressing the other deer in both herds, he asked, 'What do you think?'

After some debate, the members of both herds were unanimous in accepting the proposal of the Banyan Stag.

The next day, when the king and his men looked over the palisade of the park, they saw a single deer standing there. He was shaking with fear, but he held his antlers high with pride. The king paused, thoughtful. He realised what had happened: the kings of both herds,

those magnificent golden stags, had convinced their herds to sacrifice one deer each day, in order to avoid injuries to the rest.

Brahmadatta fell into a deep sadness in the face of the nobility of those animals. After a few minutes of reflection, he said to his men:

‘You will no longer hunt among the herds. You will only kill the deer that is offered to you every day down here for the sacrifice.’

He put away his bow, climbed down from the palisade and rode silently back to his palace, absorbed in his sad thoughts. That night he slept restlessly and dreamt that a bright deer gazed at him sadly as he approached.

Thus, for a time, a deer was chosen by lot, by turns from each herd and was sent to the chopping block of the Kashi king’s cook. Injuries and wounds were avoided in this way and, despite their gloomy fate and the deep anguish of seeing one of them leave each day, the deer were able to live in some tranquillity.

Despite having improved the situation slightly, the Banyan Stag felt his soul break every day, when he saw a deer leave the herds and walk towards its death. Day after day, he tried to encourage the deer of his herd so that they would not lose hope.

‘Try not to think beyond the present,’ he told them as the sun lit his shining eyes. ‘Enjoy the fresh air you breathe and the comfortable grass that welcomes you when resting. Let yourselves be warmed by the sun. Do not give up. As long as we live, there will be hope. I will find a way out of here.’

One day, the tragic draw fell on a pregnant hind of the Herd of the Antlers. The doe went to see her king and said:

‘I’m ready to take my destiny, but not before my fawn was born. Understand me, please,’ she insisted, ‘if I go now, two will die. I do not ask you to save my life. I am not asking for myself, but for my fawn. Let my little one be born, and I swear that the next day I will take my place on the block.’

But the Antlers Stag responded sadly:

‘The law is the law. I cannot change the rules now and, therefore, I cannot spare you from your destiny. Please, understand me. Fate has chosen you, and there can be no exceptions. You have to go.’

Desperate, the doe went to the Deer King of the Banyan. Folding her front legs, she knelt before him and begged him to do something. The Banyan Stag watched her silently, sweetly, moved to the depths of his heart.

‘Get up, sister,’ the deer king said, finally. ‘For once we will change the rules. Do not worry. Calm down and rest. You are not going to be sacrificed. I will take care of everything.’

The doe looked at him with relief and gratitude, though not joy, for she knew that, whatever the Banyan Stag did, some other would have to take her place.

The Banyan Stag lowered his head and closed his eyes. He knew that the time had come to behave like a true king. Then, he raised his head again, his magnificent silver antlers outlined against the sky.

‘My position as king and leader forces me to assume what no one else can take on.’ He thought to himself. ‘I will take her place.’

He walked slowly and with dignity towards the door of the palisade, while the members of his herd watched him pass by. They knew what he was going to do. They knew him well, he would not allow such an injustice to take place, even if it cost him his life.

A deep silence descended over the park when the Banyan King arrived at the door of the palisade. When the cook saw him, he said to the soldiers:

‘Do not shoot! The two golden stags must not die. This is what the king decreed.’

He immediately sent a messenger to the king. Soon after, Brahmadata appeared at the palisade. The king of Kashi met the eyes of the king of the deer and realised that this was the deer from his dreams.

‘Deer King of the Banyan,’ Brahmadata said at last, ‘I know you, for you have been visiting me in my dreams. Why are you here? I freed

you from this commitment, you and the king of the other herd. Why do you offer yourself for sacrifice, when I do not want your death?’

‘Oh, king of men!’ replied the Banyan Deer. ‘Today the sacrifice has fallen to a pregnant hind, who has begged me to do something to free her from this obligation, at least until after her fawn is born. But I could not do anything other than take her place. I could not condemn another of our people to die when luck had favoured them? I could not force the death penalty on someone whom fate had not called. So it must be me who takes her place.’

The Deer King of the Banyan lowered his head and swallowed and then raised his magnificent antlers to the sky and said:

‘Go ahead, shoot your arrows.’

The soldiers looked at their king, waiting for an order, but Brahmadata could not speak. Two large tears rolled down his cheeks. How could he have been so blind, so insensitive to the feelings of these noble animals, he wondered. In truth, he felt ashamed of the suffering humans caused to beings who were just as sensitive to pain and the anguish of death as they were.

‘Oh, Great Deer King!’ Brahmadata said at last, ‘You are right. A King must take responsibility for all of his subjects. Not even among human beings have I witnessed as much nobility as you have demonstrated today, along with compassion and generosity. I beg you to forgive me for not being aware of the pain and suffering of deer.’

He continued, ‘You and all the deer prisoners of this park are free to return to your forests. You may graze where you wish to on my lands. No one will hunt you again. Go and live in peace.’

‘Sir, your kindness moves me,’ the Deer King of the Banyan replied. ‘But what will happen to the other animals, birds and fish that suffer just as we do and you do? Will you hunt them, now that you have freed us from suffering?’

‘Noble king,’ Brahmadata replied with tears in his eyes. ‘I never would have thought that I could see things as clearly as I am seeing them now! Please, take my word that, while they are in my kingdom, no animal, bird or fish will be killed by the hand of a man.’

‘Listen to me, all courtiers and assistants present here,’ he shouted. ‘I decree that, from today, all beings in my kingdom will be considered my subjects. Therefore, they must not be hunted or killed. I order you to go forth and announce this decree throughout the country,’

Brahmadatta, returned his attention to the Banyan King. ‘Tell me, compassionate king of the deer, is your heart at peace with me now?’

‘Yes, great king Brahmadatta!’ replied the golden stag. ‘My heart is at peace!’

The people of the kingdom were amazed at first, but they complied with the royal order, and the animals were no longer hunted and massacred in those lands. Since the kingdom came to depend on the crops in the fields, the farmers and their lands became more respected.

As for the Deer King of the Banyan and the two herds that were once imprisoned in the park, they returned to the depths of the forests, where they led a life free from the anguish of hiding and fleeing. □

Adapted by Grian A. Cutanda (2018).

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Comments

This story belongs to the Jātaka tales, which are part of sacred Buddhist literature. The Jātaka are a collection of 547 stories that deal with anecdotes, legends and fables about the incarnations of the Buddha prior to his existence as such, between 563 and 483 b.c.e. Jātaka stories are dated between 300 b.c.e. and 400 c.e.; that is, they were composed over seven centuries.

The Deer King of the Banyan story is Jātaka no. 12, and its original title is the Nigrodhamiga-Jātaka, although for this adaptation I have drawn mainly on the adaptations of Rafe Martin (1999), Todd Anderson (1995) and K. R. Vidhyaa (2014).

Sources

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Associated text of the Earth Charter

Principle 12: Uphold the right of all, without discrimination, to a natural and social environment supportive of human dignity, bodily health, and spiritual well-being, with special attention to the rights of indigenous peoples and minorities.

Other passages that this story illustrates

Principle 2: Care for the community of life with understanding, compassion, and love.

Principle 2b: Affirm that with increased freedom, knowledge, and power comes increased responsibility to promote the common good.

Principle 15: Treat all living beings with respect and consideration.

Principle 15a: Prevent cruelty to animals kept in human societies and protect them from suffering.

Principle 15b: Protect wild animals from methods of hunting, trapping, and fishing that cause extreme, prolonged, or avoidable suffering.

