



The Bull That Won a Bet

Indian Buddhism

A long, long time ago, in the lands of Gandhara, in northern India, there was a town named Takkasila. In that town was born, in the form of a bull, a being who centuries later would be known as the Buddha. There he performed a wonder that is remembered to this day.

When he was still a calf, he was received into the house of a poor Brahmin on account of a debt that his previous owners had with the man. The Brahmin, grateful for the present, called the calf Great Joy, and treated him as if he was his own son, feeding him with porridge and rice.

As he grew, Great Joy became a formidable bull, powerful in appearance and huge in strength. He helped in the field, pulling the plow, rooting out tree stumps and digging up rocks from the ground when the Brahmin or his neighbours required his strength. They did not need to hit his sides or his back to get the job done. It was enough to say 'Pull!' or 'Stop!', and Great Joy knew immediately what he had to do.

But as big, and as strong and as clever as he was, Great Joy was even bigger in his kindness. The town children loved to play with him. He would let them climb on his back without ever seeming to get even slightly annoyed. Everyone in town liked to caress the silky white hair on his forehead and snout, and he would lower his enormous head and look at them with half closed, liquid brown eyes as if he enjoyed their caresses.

One day, as Great Joy was resting in the barn, he thought to himself, 'My owner, even though he is so poor, has always given me the best food and treated me like a son. I would like to compensate him in some way for what he has done for me.' He began to think about how he could show his gratitude by making the brahmin's life easier.

A few days later, when the two of them were on their way to a cattle fair in town, Great Joy told his owner:

'Dear friend, I would like to compensate you for all the attentions you have given me since I was a calf.'

Before he could finish saying this, the Brahmin's eyes flew wide open and he leapt onto the nearest tree and climbed up into its highest branches.

'Oops! ... Yes, maybe I should have told you that I can speak,' Great Joy calmly acknowledged, looking up at his master, crouched in the branches, 'but we never had the need for language before, did we?'

The Brahmin realised that the fact that his bull spoke was not going to make him dangerous, so he climbed down the tree and came over to listen to his noble friend.

'With the cattle fair in town,' Great Joy explained, 'there will undoubtedly be a number of rich merchants with fresh money, who are ready to have some fun by laying down some wagers. I want you to look for an oxen merchant, one who understands about draft animals. You must bet him a thousand pieces of silver that you have a bull who can pull a hundred carts loaded to the brim with boulders, stones and gravel.'

'Are you crazy!' the Brahmin exclaimed, worried about his dear friend. 'There is no bull or ox capable of dragging a hundred carts filled with rocks! I cannot do that, Great Joy. You are going to hurt yourself, and I am going to lose my money.'

'Trust me, please,' the bull replied. 'Have I ever failed you?'

'Never!' the man hurried to answer.

'Then, keep believing in me,' Great Joy concluded.

When they reached the cattle market, the Brahmin approached a group of merchants and farmers who were drinking tea next to a small bonfire. He identified a couple of merchants who looked like they might have some money to spare, and he began to extol the enormous strength of his bull.

‘Where there is an ox, there is no place for a bull,’ said one of the merchants. ‘Any of my oxen is stronger than your bull. You can be sure!’

The conversation was in the place where the Brahmin wanted it to be, so he launched his wager.

‘My bull, Great Joy, is capable of dragging a hundred carts loaded with rocks, stones, gravel and sand,’ he said, puffing up his chest.

‘Impossible!’ the merchant exclaimed, frowning.

‘I will bet you a thousand pieces of silver that he can.’

‘Agreed!’ replied the merchant. ‘I want to see you try! When and where do we meet?’

‘Have a hundred loaded carts in the town square tomorrow, at noon.’

‘I’ll wait for you there,’ the merchant said defiantly.

‘We all come and watch,’ said the others present.

Despite the self-assurance he had shown to this group of men, the Brahmin could not sleep that night. Could Great Joy really drag a hundred carts? What folly had that talking bull gotten him into? And yet, it was true that Great Joy had never failed him. Why would Great Joy risk such a thing if he did not know that he could do it?

When the sun came up, the Brahmin went to the stable, bathed Great Joy, and brushed him thoroughly. Then, he fed him with perfumed rice and, finally, he put the harness on him and hung a garland of flowers on his powerful neck.

‘The time has come, Great Joy. Are you sure you want to do this?’

The bull nodded calmly. He had no need for words.

When they arrived at the town square, they found a huge crowd gathered around its perimeter. Many bets had been made, none in favour of the brahmin. In the centre of the square, a hundred carts, loaded to the brim, waited for the superb bull to accomplish the greatest of feats ... or to make a fool of himself along with his owner.

The merchant gave the brahmin an insolent smile, then looked contemptuously at the bull who, supposedly, would drag this formidable burden. The brahmin hitched Great Joy firmly to the shaft of the first cart and then climbed up onto its seat. Although he was poor, he belonged to the highest social caste, and he did not want to embarrass himself before all the townsfolk.

For his part, Great Joy watched the expectant crowd calmly, feeling far from the worries, anxieties and anguishes plaguing his owner. He knew what he was capable of, and he did not understand why people gave so much importance to it.

A whip cracked the air above his head, and his owner yelled:

‘Come on, scoundrel! Move your ass, stupid animal! Pull and show all these people your power!’

But Great Joy did not pull. He did not even twitch a muscle to scare a fly off his hide. Very slowly, he turned his head to look at his owner, seeming to ask, ‘Who did you call “scoundrel” and “stupid”?’ The brahmin said nothing and so the bull dug his hooves into the ground ... and did not move from his place.

A thunderous laughter erupted from the crowd and the oxen merchant walked over to the brahmin, grinning triumphantly, reaching out his hand and asking for his one thousand pieces of silver.

On the way back home, neither of them said anything. The brahmin went to bed, deeply distressed and depressed. Great Joy poked his head in through the bedroom window and asked:

‘Are you sleeping?’

‘How can you suppose I’m sleeping?’ the enraged Brahmin said turning on him. ‘You have made me lose a thousand pieces of silver! And you’ve made me look ridiculous in front of the whole town!’

‘My friend,’ the bull said serenely. ‘have I ever broken a plow, trampled or crushed the crops, messed up the barn, put myself where I should not be, hurt some child, or behaved “stupidly” in any way?’

The brahmin remained silent, thoughtful, then he lowered his head and answered weakly, his eyes clouded:

‘Never, my son! You have always been a joy to me.’

‘Then why did you call me a “scoundrel” and “stupid”? And why did you crack the whip over me, when I have always obeyed your every word? Do you really think that I am to blame for your misfortune?’

‘No, it is not you who is to blame,’ the brahmin admitted finally, sobbing. ‘It’s not your fault, Great Joy. It was me. I put my fear of what people might say before our friendship. You did not leave me in the lurch. I was the one who failed you. I am so sorry.’

‘We’re going to fix this,’ Great Joy said. ‘Go back to town, find the oxen merchant and this time bet two thousand silver coins on me.’

‘Oh, my friend!’ the brahmin exclaimed, relieved to see that Great Joy did not harbour a grudge for his foolishness. ‘Right now I’m going to town to look for that oxen merchant, I’ll make a wager with him again, and I assure you that this time I will not fail you.’

It was easy for the brahmin to convince the merchant to make a new bet.

‘Since you are willing to give me more silver coins, why not?’ said the merchant, smiling arrogantly. ‘After all, I have not even unloaded the carts yet.’

They agreed to meet the next day, in the same square, once again at noon.

And again the crowd gathered. As the brahmin and Great Joy crossed the square, many onlookers mocked them. But this time, the brahmin was as calm as his bull, and none of their words affected him.

As on the previous day, the merchant met them with the same insolent attitude. The brahmin hitched Great Joy firmly to the shaft of the first cart. But, unlike the previous day, the brahmin did not get up

on the seat of the cart, but instead stood by the side of the formidable bull. Putting his mouth to the ear of the animal, the brahmin whispered:

‘The time has come, my powerful friend. Show who you truly are to all these unkind people! Pull! Pull with all your soul and amaze the world with your immense power!’

When he heard those words of affection, Great Joy sank his hooves into the ground, tensed all the muscles of his body and pressed forward. The boards of all one hundred carts began to groan. A thick silence fell over the square. The axles of the carts squeaked as the entire train, laden with boulders, stones, gravel and sand began to inch across the square. The spectators found their voices and a shout of enthusiasm rose up to the sky. When the last cart crossed the place where the first one had stood, the brahmin indicated to Great Joy that his work was done. The merchant, his face livid and his jaw hanging open, could not assimilate what had just happened.

“Great Joy, my son, you have succeeded!” the brahmin exclaimed, wrapping his arms around the immense neck of the bull.

Great Joy said nothing. He lowered his head humbly and, from his place of deep serenity, felt grateful to have been able to help his owner and friend. □

Adapted by Grian A. Cutanda (2018).

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Comments

This is Jātaka tale no. 28, the Nandivīsāla-Jātaka, where Nandi-Visāla means, precisely, Great Joy.

There is a similar story, also a Jātaka story, no. 29, the Kaṇha-Jātaka (Cowell, 1895, pp. 73-74), in which a bull, fed and cared for by a poor old woman, drags 500 carts with the intention to obtain a good amount of money to alleviate her poverty in some way.

In the Avataṃsaka Sūtra, an important text of Mahāyāna Buddhism, the term Great Joy is associated with the first stage (or path of insight) of the Bodhisattva path. From this stage it is said that "being close to enlightenment and seeing the benefit for all sentient beings, one achieves great joy, hence the name. In this bhūmi [path of insight] the bodhisattvas practice all perfections (...), but especially emphasizing generosity." (Bodhisattva, n.d.).

This adaptation has been based on the translation of the original Jātakas made by Robert Chalmers, and the adaptations of Martin (1999) and Anderson (1995).

Sources

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Cowell, E. B. (ed.) (1895). *The Jataka or Stories of the Buddha's Former Births, Vol. I* (Trans. Robert Chalmers). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 73-74.

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Associated text of the Earth Charter

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

Other passages that this story illustrates

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

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

