

Porisāda

the Man-eater



by
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Association for Insight Meditation

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Editor's Note

This booklet was written especially for children, but the Dhamma it contains is suitable for adults too. The story refers to the previous life of Aṅgulimāla, which is told in the [Mahāsutasoma Jātaka](#) (Ja 537).

In this birth as King Sutasoma the Bodhisatta practised the perfection of truthfulness (*sacca-pāramī*).

The King of Benares

A VERY LONG TIME AGO, or even before that, there was a king in India who ruled from the city of Benares, on the banks of the river Ganges, in the heart of India. The king was very fond of eating meat, and never had a meal without it. His chief cook became very skilled in preparing meat curries and always made sure that the king was given at least two or three kinds of meat dishes.

In India at that time it was customary for people to observe the Uposatha on holy days, which means that they carefully observed the five precepts. Some people went to the monastery and observed eight precepts. This meant that on those days especially they were not allowed to kill any animals at all and so would usually eat vegetarian food. On one such Uposatha day the king's chief cook was in a terrible panic. He had not been able to find any meat at all anywhere in the whole great city of Benares and the king's meal time was fast approaching. There was no meat left over anywhere and the cook knew what a rage the king would be in if there was no meat on the dinner table. The king would probably have him executed, or, at least, banish him from the city. He would be lucky to escape with his life.

At last, the cook thought of a solution. There was somewhere he could find some meat — in the city cemetery! Ugh! Well, in those days in India, when people died, their bodies were not burned, because there were just too many people in Benares and not enough firewood to cremate all the bodies. So they wrapped them in white cloths and left them in the cemetery at the edge of the jungle. Wild animals would come at night time and eat the remains.

The cook went immediately to that place and, finding a freshly dead body, he cut off a leg. Hiding it carefully, he returned to the palace kitchens. The cook was so skilled in his art that he thought, "The king will never know. I will make it taste just like roasted deer." The cook prepared the meat, carefully disguising its appearance and flavouring it with the strongest spices.

Luckily, that day the king was out riding and so came back late, giving the cook more time to work. When the king came he was ravenous and at once demanded that his meal be served. The meal was ready and steaming hot, with sauces and everything else waiting to be served. The cook served the meal at once and watched over the king with great care, making sure he was served plenty of meat and gravy — just as he knew he liked. He was not at all sure whether the king would notice anything wrong, and he was terrified of what the reaction might be if the king knew what he was eating.

Finally the meal was over, and the greedy king expressed his delight with a royal burp. “What an excellent meal you have prepared, master chef, that was the best meal I have ever had. What tasty meat did you use? We must have the same dish tomorrow.”

Well, of course, the cook dare not answer the king’s question and so made some excuse, “It is so hard to find the ingredients, I must start at once.” So saying, he snapped at the servants to hurry up and clear the table because he had many things to prepare for tomorrow’s meal.

The next day, the cook went again to the cemetery, and this time brought back enough for two days and prepared the meal in the same way as the day before. The king was again delighted with the meal, but luckily was too busy to question the cook, and the cook was not going to stay around to be asked. Kings are always busy. They have so much to do with running the army and the palace that they hardly have time to eat or relax like ordinary people.

So palace life went on as usual, except that every day the cook had to go to the cemetery in secret to find a dead body for the king’s meal. However, one day, unluckily for the cook, there were no more dead bodies, so he had to use ordinary meat. You can just imagine the king’s anger. He summoned the cook and demanded to know why his favourite dish was missing. The cook was forced to admit to the king what kind

of meat he had used. However, much to the cook's relief the king was not angry and just said, "Well that's no problem, there are plenty of condemned prisoners in the jail, you can use them for meat."

All was well again for a while, but eventually there were no more prisoners left in the jail, so the cook was again in fear of his life. However, the king said, "Never mind, there are lots of drunkards and robbers on the streets of Benares at night, just kill one of them every night for my meal the next day. The city will be better without them anyway."

So the cook did as the king said. Every night he lay in wait in some secluded spot, waiting for some drunken fellow to wander by. Plenty of drunkards or crooks were always on the streets in the early hours of the morning so there was no longer any shortage of meat for the king's table.

As the months went by, more women complained to the king's men. Some said, "My husband went out last night and hasn't come home today, he always comes back for his breakfast." Others complained that their son or their father had been gone for weeks and no one had seen him since.

The king's general suspected that a gang of robbers was at work and so told his men to patrol the streets at night to catch them. After a while, as nearly always happens when people commit crimes, the general's soldiers caught the cook in the act of killing a passer-by and brought him before the king to have him sentenced for murder. However, the king said, "Let him go, he was acting on my orders."

The general was very wise and knew that if such a wicked king was allowed to remain in power, the country would very soon become full of murderers and other evildoers, so he decided that the king must be stopped. However, the king would not abandon his evil habit of eating human flesh, so the general banished him from the kingdom, sending him away to the remotest wilderness with just his cook for a companion.

Porisāda the Man-eater

IT IS RATHER AMAZING that the king was so addicted to eating human flesh that he was unwilling to give up his bad habit even though it cost him the comfort and luxury of life in his own palace. Yet that is how it is when people become really addicted to something — it doesn't matter how much you reason with them, they will do anything to satisfy their addiction.

So it was with the king, who was now in exile. He lived with the cook for his only companion in the remote jungle and waited by the roadside for any unlucky merchant or traveller who happened to pass by. After a while the country people came to hear about a wild man who ate people, though some didn't believe the stories. Thus the former king of Benares became known as Porisāda — the man-eater. Well, he really didn't mind too much, he would just as happily eat women and children!

In time, Porisāda became so notorious that few people went anywhere near where he lived. Only strangers were unwary, so Porisāda and his cook had to hunt hard to find anyone. One day they returned empty-handed, but Porisāda said, "Never mind, prepare the sauces and light the fire as usual, I will get some meat today somehow." By this time the cook was quite alarmed for his own safety, but he had to do whatever Porisāda said, since Porisāda was a tremendous athlete, and living in the jungle had made him very fit and strong. There was no way that the cook could escape!

Porisāda Meets a Tree Deity

YOU CAN JUST IMAGINE what happened. Now Porisāda was alone and had to hunt far and wide to find his unfortunate victims. One day he came across a merchant with only a few men for protection. The ferocious Porisāda was not afraid of anyone — not even a hundred men, let alone half-a-dozen — and besides he was very hungry, as usual. He must have been a terrifying sight as

he leaped from the undergrowth, dressed now only in animal hides. The men scattered in panic and so Porisāda just grabbed the fat merchant and hauled him over his shoulder, quickly disappearing into the jungle. The men rallied themselves saying, "Come on, this merchant pays us well, let's show that we are real men."

So they pursued Porisāda into the jungle, and one strong fellow nearly caught up with Porisāda who, although he had the fat merchant on his shoulder, could still run like a lion. Jumping over a small cliff to escape his pursuer, Porisāda injured his foot severely on a sharp rock, but managed to hide and evade capture. Tired and afraid now that night was approaching, the men abandoned their search and returned to the road to find their way out of the jungle.

Porisāda was badly hurt and could no longer hunt. Having eaten the merchant, he could only rest under a tree and pray for his wounds to heal. Lying there in the jungle for several days he began to fear for his life and prayed and prayed for some help. Luckily for him, that tree was inhabited by a deity who took pity on him. The tree deity appeared before Porisāda and promised to heal his wounds in return for a great sacrifice.

In those days it was the custom to make offerings to tree deities whenever one wished for something. You may know the story of Sujāta who offered milk-rice to the Bodhisatta before he became the Buddha. She had prayed for a son after making offerings at a certain tree. On seeing the Bodhisatta seated there in serene meditation, she thought, "This must be the tree deity, a human being could not possibly be so godlike."

Well, Porisāda also believed that such tree deities could fulfil his wishes, and seeing this one right before his eyes, he was ready to do anything that the deity asked. "What do you want? Cure my wounds, and I will do whatever you ask."

The tree deity replied, "You must bring a hundred and one kings to my tree as a sacrifice. If you promise to do that, I will cure you."

“Yes, of course,” Porisāda replied, “it is no problem for me, I can capture all the kings in India and bring them to your tree.”

Perhaps due to living without meat for a while, and with the deity’s miraculous help, the wound healed perfectly. In no time at all Porisāda had regained his former strength and could run like a lion again, just as before. To fulfil his promise, which all good kings are taught to do, Porisāda captured the kings and brought them to the tree, tying them up tightly so they couldn’t possibly escape, before running off again for more. At last, he had captured one hundred kings. As he was exhausted, he decided to wait until the next day before capturing the last king. That night, the tree deity appeared before him again and told him, “You have done very well, but the last king must be King Sutasoma, who is very virtuous and famous.”

Porisāda rested well that night, happy that he would soon be able to complete his task and fulfil his promise. The very next day, at first light, he set off for King Sutasoma’s palace. Arriving there early in the morning, Porisāda hid himself under a lotus leaf in the king’s bathing pond and waited for the king to come for his morning bath. It was the Uposatha day, so the king came to bathe in preparation for observing the eight precepts and listening to the Dhamma taught by his learned and wise chief priest.

While the king was bathing, his attendants discreetly waited some distance away. Seeing his opportunity, Porisāda leapt out from his hiding place and, grabbing the king, hauled him onto his shoulder, running off into the nearby jungle. The king’s men pursued him, but they were too slow, Porisāda had already vanished into the dense undergrowth. I don’t know if you have ever been in a real jungle, but it all looks the same. It is very easy to get completely lost unless, like Porisāda, you live in it all the time and get to know the signs by which to find your way.

So Porisāda was able to run off, carrying King Sutasoma on his shoulder, who was still wet from his bath. Some drops

of water fell from his hair onto Porisāda's shoulder and Porisāda thought, "This king must be crying, for all men are afraid when they face death, even kings." So Porisāda asked, "Why are you crying? Are you afraid?"

"No, I am not afraid, nor am I crying," Sutasoma replied, "but some drops of water fell from my hair onto your shoulder."

Porisāda was very surprised at this for everyone else he had ever captured had been very much afraid, and pleaded for him to spare their lives. He asked again, "Is there nothing left behind that you will miss? Is there nothing that you long for?"

Sutasoma replied, "There is nothing I will miss for I live without attachment, but there is one thing I do regret. This morning I was going to pay respect to my priest and observe the Uposatha precepts. I promised him I would see him today, but now I shall not be able to, so I regret having to break my promise to him. I will not be able to listen to the Dhamma from my venerable teacher, that is all. If you would kindly let me return to fulfil my promise, after listening to his teaching, I will return to you here."

Porisāda was amazed by the king's reply, but said, "If I let you go you will never come back again. No one will return to face certain death when they have managed to escape. If you do come back, it will be with an army to capture me."

Sutasoma replied, "In any case, death is certain. I swear that I will return here alone or die by my own sword."

At this last remark Porisāda finally believed Sutasoma. He was, after all, a king from birth and no king ever took such a fearful vow as to die by his own sword. Also, he had known Sutasoma for many years, and never in all that time had Sutasoma told any lie or broken any promise to anyone. He was famous throughout India for his religious piety and honesty. So he stopped and put down King Sutasoma, saying to him, "Very well, then, you may go to pay respect to your teacher, but afterwards you must come at once to me here, and you must come alone."

Sutasoma gave his solemn promise, thanked Porisāda, and returned happily to the palace, glad that he would now be able to fulfil his promise to the priest.

On his return, he related all that had happened and went as he had planned to observe the Uposatha and listen to the Dhamma. The priest recited four verses, and Sutasoma offered one thousand pieces of gold for each verse to show his gratitude. Sutasoma explained to his family and companions that all loved ones must separate one day. Now the time had come for him to leave them. He had given his solemn promise and had no choice but to go. They begged him to take some soldiers with him, but he refused, saying that he had promised to return alone, so alone he would go.

In spite of their pleas, he left them with tears in their eyes and set off to the jungle where Porisāda was awaiting his return.

Sutasoma Teaches Porisāda the Dhamma

BACK IN THE JUNGLE, Porisāda saw Sutasoma coming and was very surprised to see his calm appearance. He was voluntarily coming back to face certain death yet he seemed not the least afraid. Porisāda thought, "I wonder what Dhamma he has heard from his teacher that has made him so fearless. I wish I could be as fearless as that." So he asked him politely, "Sutasoma, what did your priest teach you, I would like to know the teaching that you were so eager to hear."

Realising that Porisāda was ready to be taught a lesson, Sutasoma retorted, "What is the use of giving such a noble teaching to a hardhearted ruffian like you, you would have no use for it."

This reply made Porisāda all the more curious to know what the priest had taught Sutasoma. He begged him, "Please tell me, I will give you anything if you do."

Sutasoma then scolded him, "What is the use of a gift from a mean fellow like you, you would promise anything, but you would give nothing."

Porisāda was deeply ashamed at being scolded like this. He swore an oath to die by his own sword if he did not fulfil his promise. He said that he would give whatever Sutasoma asked for, even though it cost him his own life.

Sutasoma saw that Porisāda was now humble and ready to understand the Dhamma so he said, "Well then, take a low seat and listen respectfully, I will tell you the Dhamma taught by my priest."

"This is what my priest taught:

'To associate with the wise, even only on one occasion is of great advantage; to associate with the foolish even on many occasions is of no benefit.'

'One should associate with the wise and listen to their teaching; one who does will become noble-minded, no harm comes from learning the teaching of the wise.'

'The splendid royal chariots, once so beautiful, grow old and decay, but the teaching of the wise is ageless and never changes, this is what the wise talk about among themselves.'

'The sky is very far from the earth, and the earth is very far from the heavens, but farther apart than these are the teaching of the wise and the teaching of the foolish.'

Porisāda praised the Dhamma taught by Sutasoma and asked him to name four gifts, one for each verse.

Sutasoma replied, "I wish to see you alive and well for a hundred years as my dear friend."

This reply was cleverly judged by Sutasoma to put Porisāda at ease. He knew that if he just asked Porisāda to spare his life, Porisāda might still be afraid of what he might do if he agreed to his request. However, because he replied in this way,

Porisāda realised that he bore him no grudge and that no harm would come to him if he spared Sutasoma's life.

"Secondly," Sutasoma continued, "set free the one hundred kings and do them no harm." Porisāda readily agreed to this since he was no longer afraid of these other kings now that Sutasoma would be his powerful friend and ally.

"Thirdly, let them return safely to their own kingdoms."

At once, Porisāda untied the kings and let them go wherever they wished.

"Lastly," continued Sutasoma, "give up eating human flesh and return to your kingdom."

At this, Porisāda was very hesitant. He had promised to give whatever Sutasoma asked, but had not thought he would ask for this. He loved meat so much, especially human meat, that he had given up his palace and killed so many people mercilessly. How could he possibly live without eating human meat? Yet he had given his solemn promise, and so he had to agree to Sutasoma's request.

So Porisāda promised to give it up and to be Sutasoma's loyal friend until death separated them. He returned to his kingdom, where the wise general who was ruling in his place agreed to reappoint the king if he would live by the five precepts and remain good friends with Sutasoma.

King Sutasoma returned to his kingdom, much to the delight of his family and subjects.

The tree deity rejoiced that his scheme had worked out so well and that everything had turned out for the good of the people.

Postscript

A POSTSCRIPT IS NOT, AS you might think, something written on a post, but it is something written after the main events have been told to add to what has been said. It is not just an afterthought, but it explains why things turned out as they did. So post, in this case just means

afterwards. The postscript to the story of Porisāda happened in the time of the Buddha.

I said in the beginning that Porisāda was the king of Benares a very long time ago or even before that. Well, it is not easy to measure exactly how long ago it was — how can you count the grains of sand on a beach or the waves in the ocean? Porisāda, Sutasoma, the venerable priest, the tree deity and the wise general lived out their lives, faring according to their good and bad deeds. After many lives they were reborn in India about 2,600 years ago, in the time of the Buddha.

Porisāda was reborn as a youth who went to study in Taxila, a famous university. He was such a brilliant student that the other students were jealous of his teacher's praise for him. They lied to the teacher that the youth was in love with the teacher's wife, and so the teacher came to hate him. When the time came for the youth to pay the teacher's fee, as was the custom on completing a course of study, the teacher demanded one thousand human fingers as payment. The youth had no money to pay his teacher for his education so he was obliged to do what the teacher demanded. He killed hundreds of people, collecting their fingers to keep count, so he became known as *Aṅgulimāla* (finger-garland).

The wise general became Venerable *Sāriputta*, the chief disciple of the Buddha. The priest became Venerable *Ānanda*, the Buddha's personal attendant, and the tree deity became *Mahā Kassapa*, another leading disciple of the Buddha.

The virtuous and wise king, Sutasoma, later became the Buddha himself, and it was he who related this story of former lives for the benefit of the people, when they marvelled at his conversion of the ferocious robber *Aṅgulimāla*.

Thus in his former life, the *Bodhisatta* — the future Buddha — always spoke the truth and kept his promises faithfully. Since the time of his meeting with *Dipaṅkara Buddha* ninety-one aeons ago (which is even longer ago than the beginning of this story), the *Bodhisatta* never told

lies. When he was born as King Sutasoma he never once broke a single promise.

To very good people like him, breaking a solemn promise is just like telling a lie. Before giving his promise to do something, the Bodhisatta would think very carefully whether or not he could do what he said, but once he had said it, he always kept his promise.

Of course, if there is a very good reason why we cannot do what we promise, then it is not wrong. We can apologise and explain why we could not do what we promised, and good people will forgive us. If someone asks us to do something we don't want to do, then we should be honest enough to say, "No, I cannot do that," then we won't have to break our false promise later.