

Campeyya Jataka No. 506. The Vow works on us.

Given Day 2, October 2020 3-day Jataka sesshin, with the combined sanghas of Vermont Zen Center, Toronto Zen Centre, Casa Zen (Costa Rica), and Endless Path Zendo

Long ago the Campa River was the boundary between the kingdoms of Anga and Magadha, and there was often fighting between the two kingdoms. Sometimes Magadha won and sometimes, Anga. One day the King of Magadha, having been beaten in battle, was fleeing from the warriors of Anga. When he came to the Campa River, he thought, "Better to die in the river than be vanquished by foes," and, spurring his horse forward, plunged into the water.

Down under the river, the serpent king, Campeyya, was relaxing on the river bottom, which was covered with gold and silver powders. Flame-bright trees of branching coral hung with diamonds, rubies, emeralds, pearls also grew there. The great naga was listening to naga musicians playing on instruments of crystal and gold, and watching naga maidens dance. But suddenly the music stopped and the maidens grew still.

Looking up, the naga king saw a man on horseback drifting down through the water. He saw nobility in the man's face, and felt a liking for him. Extending his protection over both horse and rider he allowed them to arrive safely on the river bottom. Rising from his pearl throne, the naga king offered the stranger his own seat, saying, "Fear nothing, friend. I have only your welfare in mind. Tell me who you are and why you have entered my realm."

The king of Magadha poured out his troubles. After listening, the naga king said, "The solution is simple. You shall rule both Anga and Magadha."

For six days the king of Magadha stayed as the guest of Campeyya, the Naga King. On the seventh day he rose from the river and, with the serpent king's protection over him, defeated the king of Anga. Then, as promised, he ruled both kingdoms and the warring ceased. After that there was great friendship between the human king and his benefactor, the serpent king.

To honor his naga protector, the new king of both realms built a pavilion of gold and precious jewels on the riverbank. Then, each year, the glittering serpent king came up out of the river, took human form, and surrounded by thousands of his retainers, received precious gifts from the human king.

At that time, the Bodhisattva was the eldest son of a very poor family. Each year he came to view that gift giving. Awed by the riches he saw, he wished that he, too, might one day have such a life. Shortly after this, he died. The Naga King, Campeyya,

also died. As the Bodhisattva had led a virtuous life, his mind-born desire was realized. Now he came into life as the new king of the nagas of the Campa River!

Opening his eyes and seeing his long, glittering, serpentine body the Bodhisattva was alarmed and thought, "What have I done? I was a man, and had stored up as many good deeds as grains of rice in a granary. But, because of my careless wish, I've become a naga! I have gained riches, but have been foolish. My aim was not wealth, but enlightenment. I must become human again, and regain my true path."

Though surrounded by riches, the Bodhisattva was filled with shame and regret. Then a naga maiden named Sumana, seeing him there exclaimed, "Look! A great god, perhaps even Shakra himself, King of the Gods has taken life among us! Rejoice!" The naga musicians played, the naga maidens danced, and the Bodhisattva, heartened, put off his serpent form and sat on his pearl throne in the form of a noble man robed in splendor.

Choosing the naga maiden Sumana as his wife, the Bodhisattva ruled his underwater realm with integrity. One day he thought, "Though I live in magnificence as a serpent king, I am far from ultimate Truth. Better to be a man, even as I was, without wealth or power but able to practice Truth, than dwell in luxury on the river bottom. This is not the true freedom."

Then, for one day each week he fasted to increase his virtue and regain a human state. Eventually, as this easy, he decided that once a month, at the half-moon, he would return to the land, and there keep vows of fasting and non-violence where the challenge would be greater.

When the time of the half-moon came, he left the river in the form of a cobra with a body like silver. Sliding on the ground to an ant-heap, he coiled there and lay meekly in the dust with lowered hood. The people, recognizing him in that form as the naga king, didn't strike or chase him away. Instead, they offered flowers and perfumes. Seeing him return to that ant-heap each mid-month, they built a cloth pavilion for him, spread a layer of clean sand there for him to lie on, and continued making offerings so the Bodhisattva easily kept his vows.

One day at mid-month his wife, Sumana, said, "The world of men is filled with danger and treachery. How can I know if you are safe or in danger when you are there?" The Bodhisattva pointed to a clear pool in their garden beneath the river. "Wise Sumana," he said, "look at this pool. If someone hits me, the water will become cloudy. If a winged garuda, enemy of nagas, carries me off, the pool will dry up. If a snake charmer has me, the water will turn to blood." Embracing his wife, he left his underwater palace, and returned to the anthill.

A Brahmin, having just learned some potent spells in the city of Takkasila, was returning home, and heard of the silver serpent. He thought, "With my spells I might make this snake obey me. A silver dancing snake could make me rich." Repeating his mantra, he approached the Great Being who lay coiled in cobra form.

When the Bodhisattva heard the Brahmin's spell, it felt like burning splinters and iron nails were being pounded into his head. His mouth burned as if it was on fire, and his eyes hurt, like sharp thorns had scratched them. Flicking out his tongue, he raised his head and spread his hood preparing to strike. But when he saw the snake charmer he thought, "*This* is the cause of my pain? He is nothing, a mere wisp. My slightest breath could shatter his body. He doesn't know my power. But I have taken vows and will not harm him." And lowering his hood he lay back down.

The Brahmin, feeling secure in the power of his mantra, chewed herbs and spit them on the great serpent's head, where a fiery blister arose. Repeating his charm he smeared his hands with the herb, then taking hold of the Bodhisattva, dragged him from beneath the sheltering cloth and stretched him full-length on the ground. Pinning the Great Being's head with a forked stick, he beat him with a club, and spit herbs into the Bodhisattva's mouth, which filled with blood.

"Snake," he said, "you are in my power. Do as I say or you shall suffer worse!" Twisting the Bodhisattva's body, he stuffed him in a basket and set off for the next town. There, with mantra and herbs he forced the naga lord to dance.

And what a dance it was! The Great Being moved his body with such grace and speed he seemed to form circles, squares, and lotus flowers in the air. He moved his head so that one, ten, a hundred, a thousand hooded heads appeared; one, ten, a hundred, a thousand flickering tongues.

The people went wild, tossing jewels and coins. Though it was just a village, the Brahmin made good money. Then he thought, "If this snake can bring me wealth in a small town, what might it do for me in a city or at the royal court?" He bought a cart, loaded the naga king's basket on it, and drove to the capital city, Benares, followed by an admiring crowd. In every town along the way he made the serpent king dance, and gathered even more wealth. Meanwhile, the Bodhisattva refused to eat. The Brahmin killed frogs for him, but the snake king refused them thinking, "If I eat these frogs, he will only kill more. I cannot allow it. I have taken vows." When offered fried cakes and honey he thought, "If I eat these delicacies I will end up stuck in this basket until I die." So, again, he did not eat.

Sumana grew worried. She went to the pool, looked, and saw it was like a pool of blood! So, a snake charmer had her husband! At once she set out to find him. Arriving at the ant-heap she saw footprints and signs of a struggle. Taking the form of a beautiful woman like a radiant goddess, she set off through the air. Alighting in

the fields outside the village, she heard talk of a miraculous serpent's dance, and of a snake charmer's journey toward Benares. Weeping, she rose again, flying toward Benares and the palace of the king.

Meanwhile, the Brahmin, having arrived in Benares, arranged for a show before King Uggasena. Preparations were made and crowds gathered. The palace courtyard had been spread with white sand and a fine carpet placed at its center. The king, seated on a dais, watched as the Brahmin set a jeweled basket on the carpet, removed its lid, and charmed the Great Being forth. Then the serpent king began to dance, making circles, squares, and lotus flowers, making ten, a hundred, a thousand hooded heads seem to appear. The king and crowd were delighted. Handkerchiefs waved. Jewels fell like rain.

Suddenly the snake king stopped dancing. Disappointed, the crowd called, "Dance, royal serpent! Dance! You have won our hearts!" The king called, "Why have you stopped, Great Snake? Dance on! Have no fear! You shall be well rewarded!"

But the serpent king only gazed silently into the sky. The crowd, the Brahmin, and the king all looked up, too, – and were filled with wonder. High overhead, standing in the bright air, was a beautiful shining woman, weeping. Sumana had found her lord. Tears fell from the Great Being's eyes, as ashamed, he crawled into the basket where he lay hidden.

King Uggasena, called out, "Surely you are a goddess. Not human at any rate is your shining beauty. Tell me who you are and why you weep. Is it for rage or sorrow?"

"I am no goddess," answered Sumana still hovering in the air, "but a naga queen. I weep both for rage and for sorrow. My lord whose power, like that of Shakra, king of the gods is fierce as fire, whose single breath might destroy your city, dances harmlessly before you. He is this magical serpent. Because he loves goodness he has taken vows, and will not strike even to gain his own freedom. His body is bruised and blistered, his sides bony and thin. Yet beneath the Campa River, sixteen thousand nagas call him king. This snake charmer has taken a great lord for his personal profit. But as one desirous of merit, will you not, oh Lord, set him free?"

Turning to the Brahmin the king offered the finest bull of his herd, one hundred of his finest cows, one hundred coffers filled with gold and gems, and a golden throne in the form of a flax flower with blue silk cushions like petals. "Release this holy naga lord," he said, "and all this shall be yours."

"Willingly," said the Brahmin.

Then the Serpent King came out of the basket and, going into a flower, put off his serpent shape, reappearing in the form of a young man wearing golden robes. There

he stood, handsome as a god, and Sumana, descending from the skies, stood beside him. All who had come thinking simply to see a serpent's dance, found themselves well rewarded! King Uggasena with a company of nobles, then escorted the Bodhisattva and Sumana back to their river. "I have one request," he said. "May I see your underwater palace?"

The Bodhisattva agreed. Then the king and his retinue descended with the Bodhisattva and Sumana to the river bottom. Though he was a great king himself, the riches he saw there simply astonished him. "Why Great Being," he asked, "did you leave such magnificence to lie on an ant-heap in the dust?"

"This treasure," said the Bodhisattva, "is nothing compared to the treasure of human birth, through which enlightenment can be gained. And this I have vowed to do. Hills of pearl, groves of flame-coral trees, clusters of jewel-fruit, diamonds, emeralds, rubies, sapphires, mountains of gold, lakes of silver. Take whatever you will, and use it for good." Then he had the nagas fill coffers with treasure for King Uggasena who returned, rich beyond measure and strengthened in virtue, to his own kingdom.

The king had been given so much gold, however, that as he travelled home the excess spilling from his over-laden treasure carts, stained the earth. Which is why, the ground from the shores of the Campa River to the ancient city of Benares remains the color of gold today.

Commentary.

There is mystery in this jataka – of non-humans and of vows, of resolve and aspiration, as well the great mystery and hard-won challenge of our human birth. The Buddhist metaphor for being born human, said to originate with the Buddha himself, goes like this: a blind turtle swims in an endless sea. Once every hundred years it rises to the surface and lifts its head from the water. A board with a hole in it floats randomly on that ocean. What are the odds that the blind turtle will put its head up through the hole? Those are the odds we face in becoming human. The odds of encountering the Dharma are said to be even longer. Yet, here we are, having beaten those very odds. How did we do it? Perhaps a Vow lies at the root; a vow and much work. And, yet, how easy it is for us, now that we are human to take it all so for granted: "Blah. I'm a human being. So, what?"

This jataka is a reminder of how precious human birth is. And it is also a warning or wake-up call: if we fail to do our best now, how long might it be before such a chance comes again? The sea of time and space is endless, and the turtle quite blind. Tibetan Buddhism has been particularly clear on the effort it takes to acquire human form. To sum it up, a number of conditions must be met for egg and sperm to coalesce and choose to work together to create a human being. Pure essences of the parents, the five universal elements of earth, air, fire, water, and space; the three biological humors phlegm, bile, air, plus a fourth link beyond these physical conditions

supplied by the parents, that is karmic and emotional, attracting the being to be born to particular parents. Then the arduous work of forming a body and mind begins, traversing animal forms, rising at last into a human condition from a curd-like mass, which had been at one with the mother. Pushed through the birth canal we take our first breath and then first begin the long, difficult process of individuation, losing along the way our innate sense of connection and transparent awareness of the thoughts and feelings of others. We solidify, imagine ourselves isolated, and start reacting as if that were entirely real. And, then, after all that, we finally first can begin finding our way back to our Original connection, without losing what this new life and its uniqueness has brought us. The work never ends.

Why do we do it? Why do we make the effort to become human and, why, once human, do we strive to mature further? From a Buddhist perspective, the answer is, the Vow. We become human because of our Vow, and we mature further once there because of our Vow as well. But this Vow is not simply in words. It is more fundamental and more urgent, more visceral. It is the Vow of the flower to turn toward the sun, the vow of the apple seed to become a tree that produces more apples, the vow of the caterpillar to escape its cocoon, and fly. The words of our Vow are a reminder of the most fundamental aspiration of our own nature, to fulfill the potential of what we already are. And, to overcome the inherent and abiding frustration of not really knowing who or what we are.

There is another level, to this Buddhist parable. While billions are now human – in form – what does it mean to be human? How many genuine human beings are there? What does it take to become a true human being – wise, compassionate, no longer driven by greed, anger, ignorance, or fear? Here is where the parable gains power, reminding us of the work we willingly face in choosing to grow-up beyond our habitual self-centeredness. With the Vow of the Bodhisattva at our core, we gain both the energy that propels us forward, as well as a center of gravity that keeps us steady. When we stall, the Vow restarts our engine and gets us going. When our boat founders, the Vow acts as ballast, helping us to swing right-ways up again. To encounter and actualize the Dharma as a human being and through that work, to become a true and genuine *human* being is said to entail even longer odds than we meet in simply acquiring human form. Which means even greater effort and a deeper Vow.

Yet, the difficulties are important. As human beings we recognize impermanence and understand how little time we each have in which to fulfill our Vow. With human consciousness we face unanswerable questions – why are things as they are? Why is there injustice? Why do bad things happen to good people? Why warfare and duplicity? Why greed, anger, and ignorance? Why environmental destruction and racism? If the Buddha wasn't a fool or liar when he said, "Wonder of wonders! All beings are Buddha, fully endowed with wisdom and virtue?" how can things be such a mess?

While such questions can rouse our desire to understand, and make us yearn for genuine peace, and so help us fulfill our Vow, they can be hard to live with. The anxiety arising out of a genuine recognition of old age, sickness, injustice, and death, rather than necessarily making us more compassionate or motivating us to seek greater wisdom can do the opposite, and make us want to run and hide. If that happens (and it can; there are no guarantees), the story of the Buddha's home leaving becomes its own parody: the privileged prince heads out from his comfortable palace and seeing the four ego-destroying signs, finds it to all too much. Instead of leaving home to find truth and benefit all beings, he turns around, runs back inside, shuts the blinds, locks the door, turns up the music, and stays put, the Vow suppressed. Which in itself can lead to all sorts of bad events and behaviors. The energy of our Great Vow when held back, dammed up, or suppressed becomes destructive, even toxic. Refusing the call to grow and mature we stagnate and fester. As human beings, this, too, is an option. We are not on automatic. Each of us has karma and must make choices as how to work with what comes our way.

And, yet, the point of the Campeyya Jataka remains clear: from a Buddhist perspective, because of its potential for realization, despite the challenges and difficulties ordinary human existence is supremely valuable. Why? Because, simply put, as human beings we can practice-enlightenment. At the conclusion of *Bendowa* (Negotiating the Way) – one of his earliest pieces of writing after returning from China, Dogen writes –

even if all the numberless Buddhas in the ten directions, as countless as the sands of the Ganges, mustered all their might together and by means of Buddha-wisdom attempted to measure and totally know the merit of the zazen of a single person, they could not know the whole of its measure.

In this jataka, the godlike condition of unlimited ease, pleasure, and power is presented as the magnificent, shimmering, underwater realm of nagas. These non-human, serpent-like beings are said to have handsome male or beautiful female human heads and upper bodies that trail off to a snake's tail. Sometimes cobra hoods – one or several – might appear above their human head. They can also appear as cobras, as many-headed cobras, and sometimes as totally human – though it's said that if you look closely you may notice a glittering cobra hood-like aura surrounding them. They can be sensual as well as wise and spiritual. How spiritual? It is said that the Buddha recognizing that human beings were not yet evolved enough to receive the complete Prajna Paramita (transcendental empty wisdom) teachings, gave them into the safe-keeping of the nagas until we humans were mature enough to handle them. In the *Denkoroku*, (*The Record of Transmitting the Light*), Keizan Jokin (fourth Ancestor of Japanese Soto Zen), states that the great Ancestor Nagarjuna often visited the undersea palaces of the nagas, where he saw the recorded teachings of the seven past Buddhas. Keizan writes, "When Kapimala [the thirteenth Ancestor] answered the

invitation of the Naga King, he received a wish-granting jewel. Nagarjuna [the fourteenth Ancestor], speaking of that jewel said, "This is the ultimate pearl in the world."

Unlike the dragons of Western tradition, which typically hoard their gold, nagas can be quite generous. To give away a wish-granting gem, the most valuable pearl in the universe, speaks volumes. Plus, nagas have clear Dharma affinities. Kala Naga Raja a great naga king chanted songs in the assurance of the Buddha's coming enlightenment. The giant naga, Mucalinda, raised his cobra hood protectively over the newly awakened Shakyamuni Buddha during a violent storm. While snakes have often been feared and despised in European tradition, throughout the indigenous peoples of the Americas, serpent beings are, as in Asia, deeply respected. I think this in itself is a good sign for the flourishing of Dharma in the Americas.

Why shouldn't snakes be respected? They are mysterious. They live unseen lives in the depths. They can seem to possess a cool and ancient wisdom. Though flesh and bone they can flow like water and, by periodically shedding their skins, reappear as if newly reborn. The double helix of entwined serpents, the ancient healer's sign, is familiar to South American shamans. Maybe not coincidentally it is also the form of the serpentine DNA coiling at the core of every cell on Earth. In Kundalini yoga, the energy rising up the spine is described as a "serpent power." In Buddhist tradition, greatly enlightened beings, those who have recovered the mani-jewel from the deepest inner depths are sometimes, like Nagarjuna called *nagas*.

But are nagas just a myth? In actuality, we might speculate that the intelligence, curiosity, friendliness, linguistic skills, and sonar vision of whales and dolphins – land dwelling mammals who returned to the open sea – make them excellent candidates as real models for our mythic nagas, these underwater serpent-like holders of highest wisdom. A professional diver and his crew snorkeling among a pod of sperm whales where, it turned out, a new baby whale had just been born, recounts – "they were welcoming us to the most sacred of events – the birth of a new baby whale. They welcomed us, the same species from the same island as those who had killed them less than thirty years before. That is why I know they are so much more intelligent, so much more sophisticated, so beyond us humans." This event appears in the epilog to *Carnivore Minds* by G.A. Bradshaw who concludes:

Despite what humans have done, sperm whale culture remains inclusive, rooted in the belief of mutual respect. For sperm whales, [the largest predator on the planet] the counterpoint of victimhood, revenge is obviously unnecessary, and so it has failed to find a place within their society. Perhaps their seemingly infinite compassion comes from the vast oceans where they live. There space and time, subject and object, fuse in the sperm whale click-and-coda language that envelops the planet like an

invisible connective tissue. It is in this gentle world that we find an ethical exemplar who should inspire our own species' evolution.

Given this, how could a human being struggling with poverty be better off than not just a naga but a high-ranking naga lord? A lord among nagas would have immense wealth, wisdom, knowledge, long life as well as access to beautiful naga maidens. Who hasn't wished for such a life? Who hasn't wished for beauty, wealth, comfort, pleasure, and an escape from life's difficulties? This jataka provides the classic Buddhist answer: "That's all good, it's true. But it's even better to be human, because human beings are in the best position to practice enlightenment and fulfill the Great Vow. This very possibility makes human birth of greater worth than *anything*."

According to Buddhist tradition *this* is why we have been born human – not necessarily to be *Buddhists*, but to undertake the *practice* of being authentically ourselves, awake to the non-dual presence of bugs, trees, sun, moon, stars, mountains, rivers, earth and wind. This jataka puts it clearly before us: "You can have everything you've dreamed of – wealth, ease, comfort, pleasure, beauty and long life but no spiritual practice, no freedom from ego, or, just as you are, problems and all, issues and all, you can take up the way of liberation."

In the Campeyya jataka the Buddha, in a past life, stood at such a crossroads and learned – the hard way – about what was important. Poverty-stricken, he chose riches and splendor over the pains of an all-too human life, only to discover that from the perspective of his Vow, the actual Vow he'd made as the hermit Sumedha before the Buddha Dipankara World Ages ago, he'd made a fundamental error. While becoming a naga lord fulfilled his dreams of comfort and ease, he found that even with a lifestyle like that of a god, there was still a big lack – as a naga he couldn't practice enlightenment. To do that you have to be human!

Oops. Once he realizes his error he doesn't hesitate, but sets off to regain what we all now have and take so for granted – this ordinary human life. There is a warning here: be careful of what you wish for, you might get it. The Dharmic footnote to this, is that Mind is the wish-granting gem, the most valuable pearl in the universe. We should be careful, then, about what we do with it, what we allow in, and what we settle our mind on. Mind-born wishes and desires, especially when the mind is settled and empty, can generate significant power. Like vows, once they are set in motion, we may have to live out their consequences. As a result of a wish, the Bodhisattva attained a lofty, samadhi-like condition, smooth as polished silver. He got what he wished for, but then discovers it's not quite what he'd hoped. In fact, it turns out to be a dead end. With this honest recognition, he Vows to get back to a human condition and resume the Path of awakening.

This personal recognition of failure marks the re-awakening of the Bodhisattva's ancient Vow, made world ages ago in the presence of Dipankara Buddha. The pain and regret he feels is a positive thing. Actualizing a wish for an easier life had unintended consequences. His Vow reveals that he's drifted from the True Path. And here's the good news: once the Vow to become a Buddha is made, when we lose our Way, our Vow will eventually nudge push us back onto the right Path. In this way a bodhisattva, losing and finding his or her way again and again, develops the spiritual muscle needed to accomplish the Goal. Trying and failing and trying again, is not simply a sign of failure or of sad necessity. It can be actually be wonderfully positive. Through continuous efforts we gain what the Old Zen Worthies termed, "power for the Way." As Roshi Kapleau used to say, "No sincere effort is ever wasted."

Still, there's a hook, a challenge, a set-up to this magical-as-a-fairytale jataka, which is where its ego-killing venom lies: the treasure we've been seeking, the most valuable pearl of the universe is right where we are and can be ours, IF we don't let our chance go by. *But will we?* There's the rub. Will we use this life to do our best to embody our Vow or will we fritter away our all too brief time here in this rare and hard to achieve human birth?

Of course, there are human conditions where opportunities for practice and insight would be hard to come by. Famine and war, violence, ignorance, and poverty can keep our treasure hidden as well as generate lasting harm. In such realms, how can the mind ever settle? Working to bring about a society of equality, justice, and peace, then, is bodhisattva work. Yet, isn't it normal and natural to wish to escape difficulty? One of the most basic Buddhist aspirations is that all beings should be happy and free of suffering. At the same time, one of the oldest and saddest stories must surely be that of the person who works hard to gain a goal, makes sacrifices, cuts corners and cuts deals, maybe even commits crimes and, then, after finally attaining their long-sought treasure – that person, job, possession, position, whatever – discovers to their immense disappointment, that it really wasn't IT.

There's nothing wrong with satisfaction. Yet, how easy it can be when seeking a personal heaven to fall from our deepest potential. To gain the world and lose one's soul is an ancient tale. Blake wrote: "More, more is the cry of a mistaken soul. Less than All cannot satisfy." (*There is No Natural Religion.*) Here lies the lesson of the Campeyya Jataka in a nutshell, and it is one not unknown in the West. When Esau sells his "birthright" to his brother, Jacob for a "mess of pottage," the greater is lost for the sake of the lesser. Yet the *All* Blake speaks of is not gained by adding more. The All is ripe, ready for harvest now, right where we are. Zen tradition says it so simple: all we need do is to, "swallow the whole river in one gulp."

In the end, the poor Bodhisattva who'd so coveted wealth and splendor renounces them completely, giving away so much treasure that the ground itself becomes the color of gold. In the end he releases all literal treasure to gain the treasure of what we

each now already have and take so for granted: the treasure of human birth. Philip Kapleau, later Roshi Philip Kapleau commenting on his enlightenment, wrote, “But mostly, I am grateful for my human body, for the privilege to know this Joy like no other.” (*The Three Pillars of Zen*)

The Campeyya jataka remind us of this because so much of the time, clearly even 2500 years ago when it was originally told, we humans tend to overlook the worth of what we have and begin not just marking, but actively killing time. How often have we acted as if we just don't know what to do with this precious life? The story is a reminder, a warning, and a wake-up call. “Just look,” it says, “at the golden-colored earth if you don't believe the truth of all this! This is not just some old made-up story.” This ending is a traditional storytelling ploy, confirming the fantastic truth of a story with a nod toward literal reality, a way of saying, “See, it's true!” But, ploy or no, its point is solid: human life, fleeting and difficult as it is, seen truly, *is* the greatest treasure. As always, there are two sides.

Sengai wrote:

To what shall I compare this life of ours?
Even before I can say it is
like a lightning flash or a dewdrop?
it is no more.

Han Shan, the hermit of Cold Mountain wrote:

My heart is like an autumn moon
Perfectly bright in the deep green pool
Nothing can compare with it
You tell me how it can be explained.

Nothing can compare. No metaphors of moons, treasure, poverty, gods, kings, snakes, or gold can do it justice. The reality is so much greater than any of this! But to know it for real, each of us must personally do the work. The jatakas, indeed all the Buddha's teaching, all Zen teaching is a map to our own hidden treasure, showing us exactly where X marks the spot. All we need do now is roll up our sleeves and dig down, right where we are.